

VOLUME 4
NUMBER 10

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

The Leopard Girl by DON WILCOX

fantastic

ADVENTURES



MYSTERY OF THE LOST RACE
by **E. K. JARVIS**

OCTOBER
1936

OCTOBER 25c



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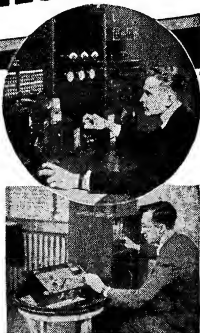
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**Mail Coupon
Now!**



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Front cover painting by J. Allen St. John illustrating a scene from "Mystery of the Lost Race"

Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul depicting "Perseus—Slayer of the Medusa"

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1942

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VOLUME 4
NUMBER 10

THE GREATEST
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The Magic of Mind

WERE the great personages of the past victims of a stupendous hoax? Could such eminent men of the ancient world as Socrates, Pericles, and Alexander the Great have been deluded and cast under the spell of witchcraft—or did the oracles whom they consulted actually possess a *mysterious faculty of foresight*? That *the human mind can truly exert an influence over things and conditions* was not a credulous belief of the ancients, but a known and demonstrable fact to them. That there exists a wealth of infinite knowledge just beyond the border of our daily thoughts, which can be aroused and commanded at will, was not a fantasy of these sages of antiquity, but a dependable aid to which they turned in time of need.

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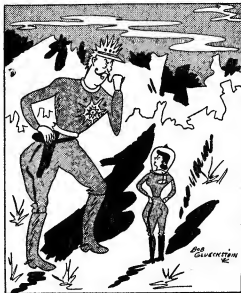
The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

ALTHOUGH Chicago is very hot as we write this, we feel rather good. We have an idea that this issue, as it goes to press is a pretty good one. We have a number of reasons to think this, and we'll skim through them hurriedly to give you a few tips.

FIRST, the cover story, by E. K. Jarvis, is illustrated by J. Allen St. John, famous Tarzan illustrator, both on the front cover, and for interior illustrations. We think this is a fine example of St. John art, and certainly a fine piece of work. Also, we are very well pleased with the story. Jarvis, although new to our pages, is a fellow we are sure you'll see again and again. He has a certain touch . . .

PERHAPS one of the finest fantasy stories we've read in many years is "The Leopard Girl" by the inimitable Don Wilcox. We use that word because we can't think of anything better at the moment. It's hard to think of words to describe the writings of Don Wilcox. Maybe we'll just not try, and let his own words speak for themselves. We think you'll "hear" plenty from this story.



"I know, don't tell me. You eat little girls like me!"

THE illustration for "The Leopard Girl" is by the popular Magarian duo, and we think it a fine piece of decorative art. Sometimes we think it is a shame we can't present the original in the magazine itself. These drawings are incredibly brilliant and delicate, and are worthy of gracing the spot of honor in an art gallery. Frankly, many of these drawings grace your editor's walls—both at home and in his many country estates—oops, who said that! Well when we do have country estates, they'll grace said walls.

FOR many months now we've been receiving letters requesting us to repeat famous stories of the past, fantasy classics that have received much acclaim in other years. Many would like to read them again, others missed them, and want to read them. Since most of these stories are out of print, our only recourse is to accede to demand, and publish them once more.

ACCORDINGLY, as a new feature of this magazine, we are instituting a new department called "Fantastic Classics." Each month, until further notice, we will present a famous story of the past. A fantasy that has lived in the memories of readers of this type of literature.

AS our initial "classic" we present Ross Rocklynne's famous "The Empress Of Mars" which was originally published in the very first issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, in May, 1939. We feel sure that the many letters we have received requesting this story certify its right to be called a "classic" and to be the first story to be presented as such. When you have read it, write us again concerning it, and give us your selections for future "classics" for our new department. It's up to you. We'll give you those famous stories you most want to read again. And to you newer readers, we guarantee that each story thus published will be the finest fantasy of the past—and you'll remember it just as we do.

THE very popular little Martian detective, Oscar, returns after a long absence in this issue. He's back with a new adventure based on the Fort Knox gold cache, in "Double Trouble For Oscar." Incidentally, James Norman, his creator, is the proud father of a new son.

(Continued on page 182)

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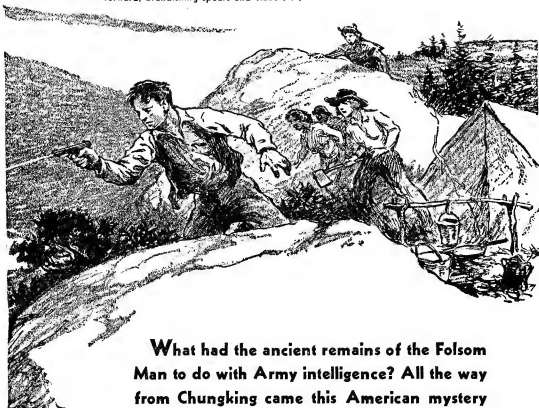
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MYSTERY OF THE LOST RACE

by
E. K. JARVIS

Yelling, weirdly dressed savages rushed forward, brandishing spears and clubs . . .



What had the ancient remains of the Folsom Man to do with Army intelligence? All the way from Chungking came this American mystery

"CAPTAIN RENAULT to see you, sir."

As his secretary spoke, Colonel Fiske looked up sharply from his desk. He was a big man in his late fifties and his hair was turning gray, a fact that he tried to forget. The desk was covered with thick files of papers, reports from agents scattered all over the world. This was G-2, Headquarters of the Intelligence Section of the United States Army.

"Captain Renault? But that's impossible—"

He caught himself. His secretary was thoroughly trustworthy. Otherwise the man would not have been working in G-2. But it was just as well that even a trusted secretary did not know what

was possible and what was impossible.

"Will you see him, sir?" the secretary asked. "I instructed him to wait but he was most insistent that he see you immediately."

Fiske hesitated. The file of papers he had been studying was still open before him. On top of the file was a rectangular piece of yellow paper, a radiogram. Decoded, it read: "Have made discovery of utmost importance. Will make complete report as soon as possible. Suggest you check place of origin of Folsom man in America."

The radiogram had passed through Chungking, China. From there it had jumped high and wide across half the world. It had been relayed through Australia to a station on an atoll in the

South Seas. Moving with leaps that would have put the seven-league boots to shame, it had jumped to Hawaii, then to San Francisco, then to this gray building in Washington. Although it had passed through an American radio station in Chungking, it had not originated there. It had originally been tapped out on a small portable transmitter carried on a shaggy Mongolian pony high into Tibet, the Roof of the World.

Because of delays in relaying, the message had taken three days to get to Washington from its place of origin.

It had been written and had been first put into the air by Captain Renault.

The question that immediately leaped into the mind of Col. Fiske was whether the Captain Renault who was waiting to see him was the same Captain Renault who had written and sent this radiogram. That was what Fiske had meant when he had said, "Captain Renault? But that's impossible—"

Renault was in Tibet. There was no other man by that name on the staff of G-2. Of course there were other Renaults among the millions of men in the armed services of the nation. This must be one of them. It could not be the Captain Renault who was a secret agent.

"I'll see him," Fiske said.

"Very good, sir," his secretary said. He closed the door. An instant later it opened again.

A tall, lean man dressed in civilian clothes stood in the door. There was the look of a hawk about him, a wary restlessness, a nervous alertness that showed in the way his eyes darted over the room. His hair was black and his face was peeling from the recent effects of sun-burn.

"Hello, chief," he said.

Fiske looked up. He leaned back in

his chair. Under the corners of his jaws his face began to whiten as a tenseness crept through the muscles hidden there. For a second he said nothing. Then, his face breaking into a broad smile of welcome, he got to his feet and held out his hand.

"Renault!" he said. "I'm glad to see you, man."

FISKE had made up his mind. The man in the door looked like Captain Renault. Under other circumstances, Fiske would have been certain he was Renault. He had the same lean restlessness, the height and the build were the same. But the radiogram on his desk proved that Captain Renault was in Asia. It was a physical impossibility for Renault to have beaten the radiogram to America. Therefore, Fiske reasoned, this man was not Renault.

Then who was he?

One answer instantly leaped to Fiske's mind. He was an enemy agent masquerading as Renault! He was a spy attempting to worm his way into G-2, into the heart of the Intelligence Services of the American armed forces!

Fiske, as he rose to his feet and offered his hand, had already set about trapping the spy. When he said, "I'm glad to see you, man," he was not merely greeting a comrade, he was using a test phrase which only a G-2 agent would recognize.

"What's the idea, chief?" the visitor said. "Don't you recognize me?"

"Of course I recognize you," Fiske instantly answered, a surprised look on his face. "What gave you the idea that I didn't?" He sat back down and his hand moved toward a button on his desk. The visitor should have said, "Old topper, how are you?" Instead he had said something else. But he had seemed to recognize the test phrase.

Fiske hesitated, for two reasons. This man had seemed to recognize that he was being tested. But he hadn't known the correct answer. Renault would have known both.

"I don't have any time to waste in signs and countersigns," the visitor said abruptly. "Chief, I've just run into the damndest thing! I would have been here yesterday if I could have found a horse. As it was, I just managed to get into Denver in time to catch a plane, after riding a motorcycle most of last night. And I don't know yet whether I threw them off my trail. I've had the feeling I've been followed all the way—" He broke off to glance around the room.

Fiske kept his face strictly under control. Not by so much as the twitch of an eye-lash did he indicate that his visitor was talking gibberish. A horse, a motorcycle, a plane out of Denver! There was no doubt that this man was a spy. He had suspected he was being tested and was trying to bluff his way through. Fiske took his hand away from the concealed button. He decided to let the man talk. He might learn something that way.

The visitor finished his scrutiny of the room. He turned back to Fiske. "This is nonsense to you, isn't it?" he said.

"Occasionally there is a great deal of sense in nonsense," Fiske answered evenly. He was waiting to see what was going to happen. Meantime he intended to admit nothing.

"Yes, I know. But, chief, I've just run into the damndest thing—"

"So you said before," he colonel imperturbably answered.

"I don't know where to start."

"There is only one place to start—at the beginning."

"You hit the nail on the head that time. The hell of it is, I don't know

where this thing begins. The more I think about it, the less I understand it. It must be as old as the earth, and maybe older!"

"Uh—" Fiske choked. As old as the earth, and maybe older! Was this spy insane? Was that the explanation of this gibberish? Or was there something incredibly sinister hidden behind this nonsense? "Sit down and tell me all about it. Here. Have a cigar." He shoved a box of fragrant Havanas toward the man who claimed to be Renault.

"I've got to keep on my feet," was the answer. "If I sit down for more than a minute, I'll go sound asleep. Except for a few hours I snatched on the plane, I haven't had any sleep in days."

He looked haggard. There was a tic in his left cheek and a wild light in his eyes. He seemed to be having difficulty in controlling his thoughts.

"Where was I?" he said vaguely.

"You were about to start at the beginning," the colonel prompted.

"Oh, yes. But first I want you to take a look at this." He brought something out of his pocket and as tenderly as a man setting down a basket of eggs laid it on the intelligence officer's desk. It was wrapped in a newspaper.

"Unwrap it," the spy said.

Fiske hesitated. "What is it?" he asked.

"Look and see," the spy said. "It will make your eyes pop open."

FISKE removed the wrappings. He did not know what he expected to find. It might be some secret weapon that would shorten the course of the war. He stared in incredulous amazement at what he saw.

It was a spear point. It was made not of bronze or iron, but of *flint*! It was a weapon that belonged in the stone

age, that had been made by a workman before men learned how to use metals! In museums he had seen hundreds of similar weapons that had been made by the Indians.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" Fiske demanded, looking up at his visitor.

"It—" There was eagerness in the man's voice. He was anxious to tell what he knew. And the tone of his voice showed that he thought what he knew was of tremendous importance.

Like the collapsing of a pricked toy balloon, the eagerness went out of his voice. Sound went from it. He choked, gulped, and standing erect, seemed to start to sway.

"What the devil is the matter—" Fiske got no farther. Dimly he heard a soft tinkle, like the sound made by a small piece of falling glass. It came from the window. As if the sound were a signal, the spy swayed forward. He was standing directly in front of the colonel's desk. Fiske leaped to his feet, his fingers jabbing at the buzzer button. The man fell across the desk. A red liquid flowed from his head, staining the files.

"Holy jumping Jupiter!" Fiske gasped. "The man has been shot through the head!"

One glance told him that the spy was dead. There was a hole in both sides of his skull. Fiske ran to the window and looked out, seeking to discover the assassin. The broad boulevard in front of the building was filled with traffic, passenger cars, light trucks, taxicabs. The sidewalks were covered with pedestrians. Fiske scanned them, seeking a man with a gun. One pedestrian was carrying a suitcase. A gun might be hidden there. Another had a briefcase. Down the street a surveyor was sighting through a transit. Across the boulevard workmen were rushing the con-

struction of a new building. There was no sign of the killer anywhere.

The door of the room was kicked open and three men, coming in response to the buzzer, rushed in.

"What is it, chief?"

"Something wrong, sir?"

They saw the man on the desk and their questions went into abrupt silence.

"Jenkins," Fiske snapped. "Round up every available man and get out there on that street and see if you can locate a killer."

"Yes, sir."

Jenkins was gone.

"Haggard and Walsh," Fiske said to the two who remained, "Take this body to the laboratory and make a complete examination."

"Yes, sir. Do you know who he is, sir?"

"No. Take his finger-prints and find out. Move."

While the two men were lifting the body from his desk, Fiske picked up the telephone. He called, in swift succession, the police department and the F.B.I. When he hung up, he had the knowledge that everything possible would be done to apprehend the killer.

The killer was important. The spy had been killed for some good reason. The killer might know the reason.

Fiske rang for his secretary.

"Where's Viktor?" he demanded.

"He's in town, sir," the secretary answered. "He is working on the Mattingly matter, as you may recall, sir."

"Get him down here at once," the colonel ordered. "I've got another job for him."

Viktor was his ace operative, the man he called in for the toughest jobs.

The door had scarcely closed behind the secretary when it opened again.

"Hello, chief," a voice said. "I hear you got a new job for me."

"Viktor!" Fiske almost stuttered.

"How the devil did you get here so quickly?"

"I was coming in anyhow, to report. What you got on your mind?"

"Plenty," Fiske growled. "Sit down."

CHAPTER II

Viktor Takes Over

SAM VIKOR was tall and skinny; he had bow legs, hair the color of dried carrots, freckles on his face, and a big nose, none of which caused him the slightest shame. His clothes always looked as if he had slept in them, and this was generally the truth. To look at him one would think he had just got off the train from Podunk and was seeing the sights of the big city for the first time. He spent his life in a state of perpetual amazement. This was one of the sources of his strength. An enemy always underestimated him. His ability at poker was almost a legend. No poker player, looking at Viktor, ever thought that the agent held more than two pair. It had been a source of infinite amazement to many men to learn that Viktor was holding a full house. Viktor, raking in the pot, had seemed equally amazed that he had won. He listened without interruption to what Fiske had to say. And when the colonel had finished, he still didn't speak. He got up and walked over to the window and examined the hole the bullet had made.

The hole was almost half an inch in diameter. The pane of glass had not shattered.

Viktor grunted and walked back to the desk. He picked up the stone spear head and subjected it to a scrutiny.

"What do you make of the whole business?" Fiske growled.

"I don't make anything of it," Viktor answered. "What is Renault doing in Asia?"

"Locating a string of air fields so our fighter planes can make the hop from Iran to China," Fiske said grimly. "It was an odd assignment for an intelligence agent but he has been in Tibet before and knows the country. Besides, he asked to go."

"How do you know he is still in Asia?" Viktor asked.

"Because I have a radiogram from him dated three days ago," Fiske answered. He showed Viktor the rectangle of yellow paper. The blood of the dying man had stained one edge of it.

"Um," said Viktor thoughtfully. "What is a Folsom man?"

"That's the name given to one of the prehistoric races of America," Fiske answered. "I looked it up. They lived in Colorado."

"The devil they did!" Viktor said. "And this spy said he had caught a plane in Denver, which is also in Colorado. Chief, how do you know that this man who was killed in your office was not actually Captain Renault?"

"Because it is impossible for Renault to get from Tibet to America within three days!" Fiske stormed. "What is it?" he broke off.

The door had opened. Jenkins stood there. "We haven't been able to find a sign of the killer," Jenkins said. "I can't find anybody who saw a shot or heard the sound of a gun. The police are still working on it. They have thrown out a dragnet but they say they can't do much good unless they have some kind of a description of the man. If you could tell us what he looked like—"

"I didn't see him," Fiske snapped. "Do you mean to tell me that this killer walked right out from under your nose without you or the police being able to find him?"

Fiske was being unfair, and he knew it. He was a harassed man, with vast

responsibilities on his shoulders, and little time in which to make decisions.

Jenkins reddened. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Not your fault," Fiske said hastily. "Get back on the job and do the best you can."

"Yes, sir." Jenkins left on the run. Fiske turned back to Vikor but before he could speak the door opened again. Haggard, the laboratory technician, stood there. Haggard's face was the color of gray paste.

"Chief—" he whispered.

"What is it?"

"He—he wasn't killed by a bullet."

THE colonel stared in bewilderment at his laboratory expert. "Not killed by a bullet?" he demanded. "Then what the devil did kill him?"

"I—I don't know, sir," Haggard answered. "There was a hole completely through his head but it wasn't caused by a bullet. It was *burned* there, sir."

Vikor, standing to one side, heard the conversation. For once in his life there was no look of amazement on his face. Instead there was an expression of keen, hard alertness on his features.

"But that's impossible!" Fiske shouted.

"I examined the wound myself," Haggard insisted. "I do not know how it was caused but there is no question in my mind but that it resulted from burning."

There was silence in the office. From the street outside came the honk of taxicabs. Vikor heard Fiske catch his breath. Whiteness was creeping over the colonel's face.

"And that's not all, sir," Haggard said.

"Not all?" Fiske husked. "What else is there?"

"That dead man—he wasn't a spy."

"No? Then who was he?"

"He was Captain Renault, sir, of our

own service."

"Captain Renault—" Fiske's voice was a whisper in a hushed room. "That—that is scarcely possible. I admit he *looked* like Renault, but—"

"The finger-prints prove it, sir."

"You took prints?"

"You ordered it, sir. There is no chance of a mistake. I checked the prints myself and there is no question in my mind of the identity of the dead man. He was Captain Renault, sir."

Again silence fell over the room. Now it was a strained silence, tense with the unexpressed thoughts of three men. It seemed to Vikor that Colonel Fiske aged years with each passing second.

"Thank you," Fiske said at last to the technician. "That is all for now." As he left, Haggard closed the door so softly behind him that it made no sound.

"I'm afraid he is right, chief, about the way Renault was killed," Vikor said, walking over to the window. "If you will notice this hole, you will see that its edges show signs of intense heat. A bullet would cut a clean, round hole, and it would leave flaky edges behind it. Also this hole is larger than it would be if it was caused by a bullet fired from any pistol with which we are familiar."

"I'm growing old," Fiske said bitterly. "Things happen around me and I don't notice them. I'm going to resign and let them put a younger man in my job—"

"Easy, chief," Vikor said.

"But, Sam, I should have recognized Renault when he came in. And I *did* recognize him, but because I thought he was in Asia, I assumed the man who came to see me was a spy. I stalled Renault around, trying to find out what he was up to, when all the time he was desperately anxious to tell

me something. He would have had time to tell me, if I hadn't stalled him. This is awful. I'm no longer fit to command—"

Colonel Fiske was in agony, because in his opinion, he had been derelict in his duty. He had failed his country.

"Nonsense!" Vikor said angrily. He walked around the desk and slapped his superior on the back. "You can't be blamed because something happens that is contrary to all the laws of nature as we know them. Listen, chief, after Renault was killed, what did you do?"

"I went to the window and looked out."

"Did you see anything unusual?"

"Not a damned thing."

"You were looking for a man with a gun. You didn't see him because a gun wasn't used. Did you see anything else that looked suspicious?"

"No," Fiske said slowly. "There was one man with a suitcase, several with briefcases, and—wait a minute!" He had recovered from his momentary feeling of depression. "There was a surveyor out there, a fellow with a transit."

"Ah!"

"Holy jumping Jupiter!" Fiske gasped. "That transit! What if it wasn't a transit?"

"NOW you're back on your stride,"

Vikor said approvingly. But Fiske was already ringing for his secretary. "Go hunt up Jenkins," he snapped. "Tell him to be on the lookout for a man with a transit. Call the police and have them pick up every surveyor they find on the streets. Have them begin checking every surveyor in Washington—"

Vikor grinned to himself as he listened to the conversation. Fiske was himself again. He was again the man who got things done, the hard-driving fight-

ing chief who slashed red tape, balked at no precedent, and saw to it that the vast activities of G-2 continued day and night without let-up.

Now, Vikor knew, as never before there was need of those activities. Renault, one of the cleverest men in the service, had seemingly come from Asia in something less than three days. This was impossible. But it had happened, or else the radiogram had lied. Renault had been killed while he was in the act of revealing information that he evidently considered of supreme importance.

Obviously he had been killed to keep him from talking.

But how had he been destroyed? What incredible weapon had been used to blast a hole through him?

Why had Renault said he had caught a plane in Denver? Why had he said he would have been in Washington a day sooner if he could have found a horse? Of all things, why had he needed a horse? Fiske had repeated to Vikor his conversation with the dead intelligence officer. Vikor was turning these and other questions over in his mind. They were unanswerable questions.

There was one question that was more unanswerable than all the others.

Why had Renault attached such supreme significance to a spear point made of flint?

"You are in full charge of this investigation," Fiske said, turning to the intelligence agent. "Take whatever measures you consider necessary to meet any situation that may arise. Whatever you do, I'll back you up."

"Yes, sir."

"Where are you going to start?"

"With this," Vikor said, picking up the spear point. "I'm going to take it to a museum and find out what it is. Then I am going to hunt up somebody

who knows something about Folsom man."

"Do you think there is a connection between that spear point and a prehistoric race and what happened to Renault?"

"I don't know," Vikor said. "But Renault was not a man who talked through his hat. If he said that we should investigate the origin of Folsom man in America, he had some good reason for his statement. I'm going to discover that reason. In the meantime, you catch that fellow with the transit."

"We'll get him," Fiske said grimly.

Vikor walked across the room and out of the building. He walked with a peculiar gliding motion that was almost soundless.

CHAPTER III

At the Museum

THE curator of the museum, interrupted in what was apparently a very absorbing occupation of classifying a collection of beetles, was not at all impressed by his visitor, and his attitude plainly revealed that he wished this tall, gangling lout would quickly state his business and get to hell on out. This did not annoy Vikor. He was used to it. Nobody was ever impressed by his appearance. He brought the flint spear point out of his pocket and laid it on the curator's desk.

"I should like to know what this is?" he said.

"That?" The curator glanced at it. He did not even bother to pick it up. "It is the head for a spear." His manner indicated that any idiot would know this.

"Who made it?" Vikor asked.

"How should I know who made it? I'm no ethnologist. I know nothing

about such things."

"Um," Vikor said. For a moment he considered reaching across the desk and taking this curator by the neck and shaking some civility out of him. He decided against this course, much as it appealed to him. "Then I should go to an ethnologist to find out about this spear point?"

"Certainly."

"Is there an ethnologist connected with the museum?"

"Yes. One of the best in the world. Dr. Watkins."

"Could I see this Dr. Watkins?"

"I'm afraid not," the curator flatly said.

"No?"

"No!"

"All right," Vikor sighed. "You asked for it. Take a look at this and then come down off that pedestal and talk like a human being." He laid a small gold badge on the desk.

The curator looked at the badge. His manner underwent a startling transformation. "I'm sorry," he gasped. "I didn't know—"

"Forget it," Vikor said bluntly. "Trot out this prize ethnologist of yours and do it in a hurry."

"I'm sorry," the curator apologized. "Dr. Watkins is in Colorado at present. If this matter is of importance you will have to go there—"

"It's important all right," Vikor said. "What is this ethnologist doing in Colorado, if I may ask?"

"Dr. Watkins is in charge of excavations at the Lindenmeier site in northern Colorado," the curator explained. "I am not a specialist in this field and have only a vague general knowledge of it but I believe they are excavating in an effort to discover further relics of the Folsom man. In case you are unfamiliar with the subject, the Folsom man is the name given to one of

the early races in America. It is, I believe, a great mystery to the ethnologists—”

“It is a great mystery to me too,” said Viktor. “How do I get to the place where this digging is going on?”

“You mean you are going there?”

“I don’t mean anything,” Viktor answered.

“But why,” the baffled curator asked, “is the Army intelligence service interested in an extinct people? And the Folsom man is certainly extinct.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be wasting your time. You tell me how to find this ethnologist and then you can get back to your bugs.”

The curator, now that he knew the identity of his visitor, was eager to help. He gave the intelligence agent specific instructions for reaching the place known as the Lindenmeier site.

WHEN Viktor walked out of the museum, he had a hunch that already factors in this situation were slipping into place. He was beginning to get answers to some of the perplexing questions posed by Renault’s death. The only trouble was, the answers were more perplexing than the questions. Renault, when he should have been in Asia, had suddenly turned up in Colorado. How in the devil he had gotten there was a mystery. Renault had said to investigate the origin of Folsom man in America. Folsom man, it now appeared, had also lived in Colorado. The ethnologist recommended by the curator was in the same place.

Everything added up to one answer. Viktor did not know that answer. He was going to seek it, in Colorado.

He stopped on the steps of the museum and fished in his pockets for a package of cigarettes. As he struck a match, a man, who had been loitering on the sidewalk, started up the steps.

Viktor seemed not to notice him. He flipped the match away.

“Un fumi—match?” the man said, pointing to a cigarette he held in his hand.

“Sorry,” Viktor shrugged. “I just used my last one. Here, you can get a light off the end of my cigarette.” He extended it toward the loitering man. The fellow started to take it. He glanced up, once, out of slitted eyes at Viktor. His hand darted toward his coat pocket.

The intelligence agent shoved the end of the lighted cigarette against the fellow’s cheek.

“Eee-yow!” the man yelled. He jerked his head away and pulled his hand out of his pocket. Viktor struck downward, hitting with the edge of his palm, his fist half closed. The gun, half drawn from the man’s pocket, spun in an arc out of his hand and hit the steps with a metallic clatter.

An expression of ludicrous amazement appeared on Viktor’s face. “Who would ever have thought you had a gun in that pocket!” he observed.

The man, cursing under his breath, tenderly felt of his cheek. A red blister was already forming there.

“I’m a little sorry—uck!”

Viktor caught a glimpse of a moving shadow coming from behind. Not until then did he realize that there might be two men. He tried to dodge. Something struck the base of his skull with stunning force. Stars exploded in his eyes. Vaguely he knew he started to fall and was caught before he hit the steps. He had the dim impression that hands were going through his pockets. Somewhere in the distance he heard an exclamation of satisfaction. The hands that were holding him up abruptly released him. He fell, slid down the steps, tried to get to his feet, found that his legs had suddenly been turned into rub-

ber, and sat down heavily. Then, because it was easier, he lay down. The concrete felt nice and soft. It was so soft he couldn't feel it.

After several black infinities had passed, he heard a voice say with considerable satisfaction.

"Drunk, huh?"

VIKOR opened his eyes. A cop was looking down at him. He was the center of a circle of legs and above him a ring of faces were watching him with that pathetic interest the public displays when viewing the victim of a tragedy. He sat up. "Go away," he said. It was not what he wanted to say at all. He wanted to swear. He wanted to call himself all the bad names he knew.

"This will cost you thirty days in the can," the cop said. "We don't allow no drunks here."

"Where were you when those two men slugged me?" Vikor said bitterly. "You guys are never where you're needed. You're always somewhere else."

"Huh? What two guys?" the cop said suspiciously. "Listen, mug, stalling ain't gonna get you nowhere. Get up from there. You're under arrest."

"I'll get up all right but I don't believe you are the man who will put me under arrest." Vikor got to his feet. He fumbled in his pocket for his badge. The cop took a look at it. An unhappy expression appeared on his face. He took a second look. The unhappy expression became more pronounced. He started to say something to Vikor and abruptly changed his mind.

"Why don't you arrest him, officer?" somebody spoke from the crowd.

This gave the cop an object for his wrath. "What do you mean by blocking the sidewalk?" he shouted. "Move along before I throw the whole bunch of you in the jug! Get moving." He

waved his nightstick threateningly.

The crowd hastily dispersed.

"What happened?" he said, turning back to Vikor. "Can I do anything for you? I didn't know you were an intelligence man."

Vikor didn't answer. He was busy searching his pockets. His gun was in its holster, his wallet, with a thick pad of bills, was intact, his rings, his badge, his watch, he had them all.

Only one thing had been taken!

"You can do one thing for me," he said to the cop. "You can tell me where I can find the nearest telephone."

"Right inside the museum," the officer hastily assured him.

"Chief," he said into the telephone a few minutes later, "I am sorry to inform you, but we are short one flint spear head."

"What?" Fiske's voice gasped over the wire. "What the devil happened?"

Vikor told him.

"They slugged you just to steal a spear head!"

"Well, it's the only thing they took," Vikor hazarded. "So I guess that was why they slugged me."

"That thing must be damned valuable, in some way," Fiske said, after a moment's thought.

"That is the conclusion I have reached," Vikor said. "Have you caught the man with the transit yet?"

"We've caught twenty surveyors, if we've caught one. They're screaming their heads off in every police station in town. We've got enough transits to survey the state of Texas, but every damned one of them is just a transit and nothing else."

"Have you found the man who was doing the surveying near your office?"

"We have not!" Fiske shouted. "But we're still looking."

"There is another lad you can be looking for at the same time," Vikor

said. He gave a description of the loitering man. "He doesn't speak English very well and there are—or were—two of them. If you catch them, lock them up and throw the key away. I've got a bump on the back of my head as big as an egg."

"We'll do that," Fiske promised. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to take a ride in an airplane," Vikor answered. "Call the airport and use your influence to reserve me a seat on the next ship bound for Colorado. The pay-off on this business is there instead of here and that's where I'm going."

"Done," Fiske answered. "Keep in touch with me, and good luck."

VIKOR hung up. Gingerly he felt of the lump on the back of his head. It was very sensitive. He winced at the pressure of his fingers on it.

"If ever I get my hands on that guy!" he said. "There will be bumps on him that he won't be able to rub off in months."

He caught the plane. It was jammed with passengers, every seat taken. One of the passengers was a girl. She had black hair and black eyes and a skin the color of cream. She had the most nearly perfect complexion that Vikor had ever seen. He regarded it with approval, noting at the same time that she was holding a small lacquered box very firmly in her lap. She was sitting across the aisle from him.

Glancing up, she saw him. A look of startled recognition appeared in her eyes. She glanced quickly away, her grip tightening on the box in her lap.

"Well!" thought Vikor. She recognized him. It seemed strange to him that he couldn't remember having seen her before. He had an excellent memory for faces, and he would certainly remember black eyes, black hair, and

skin the color of rich cream.

There was something else that troubled him even more but he couldn't think of any way to do anything about it until the plane ran into some rough air over the Allegheny Mountains. The passengers were tossed about a bit and the stewardess was busy trying to help those with squeamish stomachs and was cautioning all of them to remain in their seats. Vikor got to his feet. A lurch of the plane seemed to throw him off balance. He teetered on one foot for a moment, clutched frantically for something to hold on to, didn't find it, and fell flat on the lap of the girl with the perfect complexion.

She uttered a yelp, the lacquer box fell on the floor between her legs, and Vikor muttering apologies, tried to get to his feet. He seemed to be all arms and legs, and the harder he tried to get up, the more difficult the task became. The stewardess rushed to help him, but even with her assistance, he had trouble getting himself erect.

When he did get to his feet, he apologized profusely. "I'm sorry," he said. "We must have hit a bump. Did I hurt you, lady?"

The girl, hastily retrieved the lacquer box, pushed down her skirts, and stared straight ahead.

Vikor, his face red, stumbled back to the tiny washroom, where he closed the door and regarded himself in the mirror.

"Vikor," he said, shaking an admonitory finger at himself. "You are a pick-pocket and you ought to be thrown in the can. Shame on you, you rascal, taking advantage of an innocent girl!"

During the time he had been trying to get to his feet he had managed to open the lacquer box and had palmed its contents, which now rested snugly in his pocket.

He did not know what was in the

box but he did know that when the girl had seemed to recognize him, she had instinctively clutched at it. In his business and in his position, no better clue was needed.

The contents of the box were wrapped in tissue paper. He removed the wrappings.

An expression of pained amazement appeared on his face.

He was holding the flint spear head. It had been in the box.

"THE way this damned thing disappears and appears is downright perplexing!" he said. In spite of his apparent amazement, he was not greatly surprised that the spear head had been in the box. But he somewhat surprised at the speed the loitering man had displayed in getting the spear head into the hands of a third party and on a west-bound plane.

He went back into the plane and conferred with the stewardess. "The passenger in seat nine is going to Denver," the stewardess told him.

"Well, well," said Viktor. "And what is our next stop?"

"Columbus, Ohio."

"Thank you."

He went back to his seat. During the rest of the journey to Columbus the passenger in seat nine did not even glance in his direction. With the lacquered box held firmly in her lap, she stared straight ahead.

When the plane landed in Columbus he hurried into the station and put through a long-distance phone call. "She is going to Denver," he said. "Our next stop is St. Louis. Put a man on the plane at St. Louis to tail here. I would do it myself but I have other things to do. Find out where she goes, who meets her, and everything else about her that you can."

Certain that his instructions would

be obeyed to the letter, Viktor hurried back to the plane. The motors were already turning over and the ship was ready to take off. He hastily climbed aboard.

"We almost left without *you*," the stewardess said.

Viktor went forward to his seat. He glanced across the aisle. Seat nine was now occupied by a heavily built, fat-faced individual who was obviously a salesman.

"Hey!" Viktor shouted at the stewardess. "What happened—"

"The lady in seat nine decided at the last moment to stop over in Columbus," the girl said sweetly. "Another passenger was waiting to see if there was a last minute cancellation and he was given her seat."

"The devil she did!" Viktor gasped. "Hey! Stop this plane! I've got to get off."

"Sorry," the stewardess advised him. "We're taking off now."

Motors roaring, the plane was already gliding down the runway toward the take-off.

"Are you ill?" the stewardess asked, observing his face.

"Yes," Viktor grunted. "I'm not only ill, I'm sick." He clumped forward to his seat. He had been tricked. The girl had outwitted him. By the time he got somebody on her trail in Columbus, she would be gone forever.

A few minutes later the stewardess paused beside him. "Maybe this will make you feel better," she said. "The lady in seat nine asked me to give it to you. She said you needed it more than she did, *now*."

Viktor glanced at the object the stewardess was holding toward him. It was the lacquered box.

"Whatever made me think *I* was an intelligence agent?" he groaned to himself.

CHAPTER IV

Viktor Meets an Ethnologist

VIKTOR spent a night in a Denver hotel. The next morning he hired a car. When the road gave out in a small town, he rented a horse from a livery stable. It was a slight shock to him to realize there were places in America that could not be reached by a hard road.

"It's about twenty miles to where them ethnologists are diggin'," the lanky livery stable attendant told him. "They rented some horses from us but one of them must of got loose because he came back. You better take some grub along with you, mister, if you're gonna be gone long."

Viktor took this advice. Then, with the sack of food tied behind him on the saddle, he rode away. It was a vast and lonely land that he rode into, a land of high mountains and deep valleys, a forlorn and almost forgotten world. In this quiet place it was difficult to realize that on a thousand fronts flung to the four corners of the earth American men were fighting a bloody war and that he was part of this war. Here everything seemed peaceful. There was war in the world but it was far away. Yet he knew that his mission here in these mountains was in some weird way connected with the war. The death of Captain Renault proved that this connection might well be vital.

What had Renault discovered? How had he been killed? Why had he thought the spear point now in Viktor's pocket to be of supreme importance? Who was the girl with the perfect complexion? How did she fit into the picture?

Viktor sighed. There was no clear answer to any of these questions. That

was why he was going to so much trouble to locate this Dr. Watkins. The ethnologist, in supplying data on the spear point and on the equally mysterious Folsom man, might enable him to clear up some of these puzzles.

It was late in the afternoon before he located the place he was seeking. A tiny streamer of blue smoke rose from between two brown tents set in a level space that apparently had been a flood plain in some remote geological area. On three sides high mountains rose to the sky. A small stream wound past the tents. It was an ideal spot for a camp.

Viktor rode down to it. A man, seated on a canvas chair with a packing case for a desk, was pounding a typewriter in front of one of the tents. As Viktor rode up, he saw that it wasn't a man. It was a girl.

"Dr. Watkins brought a secretary along," he thought.

He reined up beside her. "I'm looking for a Doctor Watkins," he said. "I was told I could find him here. Will you direct me to him?"

Without rising from her chair, the girl looked him over. She was wearing boots and riding breeches, she had brown hair and blue eyes, and she had apparently been assisting in the excavating going on at one side for there was a dab of dirt directly on the end of her nose.

"I'm Doctor Watkins," she said. "Who are you and what can I do for you?"

The look of amazement that appeared on Viktor's face reflected exactly his emotional state. He had come here looking for an ethnologist and he had expected to find some decrepit male with a peppery vocabulary and a long gray beard. Logically, ethnologists should look like that. Instead he had found a girl.

"You—" he gulped. "You are Doctor Watkins?"

"Yes," the girl said defiantly. "If you know any good reason why a woman should not have a Ph.D, please give it to me. And if the only reason you have for coming here is to look surprised, please go away. I'm busy."

VIKOR dismounted. "Some day," he said, "I am going to meet somebody and not be insulted the first crack out of the box. Tell me, doc, is this your natural state or are you mad about something?"

"Where did you get that horse?" the girl demanded.

"I rented him from a livery stable."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I don't give two hoots in Georgia whether you believe it or not. What's the horse to you, if I may ask? Or would that be prying too deeply into your personal affairs?"

"The horse is not my long-lost brother, if that is what you are implying when you ask what he is to me. However, the animal happens to have been stolen from this camp. That's all he is—a stolen horse!"

Vikor carefully relaxed into a folding chair before he attempted to answer this one. He had rented a stolen horse! Or was this girl, for reasons of her own, trying to get rid of him by making him uncomfortable?

"Can you prove he was stolen from you?" he asked.

"N—no. But—"

"Then, if I may be so bold as to suggest it, you've got a lot of nerve accusing me of stealing him. However, I suggest we forget about the horse. I have other things on my mind." He looked around the camp. The diggers had left off their excavating and were approaching. There were three of them. One had a shovel, the second

a spade, and the third was carrying an ax. They were all girls.

"If I may ask, what are you girls doing out here conducting an ethnological expedition? This is a man's job."

"We're out here because the work is important and because all the *men* happen to be at war!" Dr. Watkins snapped. "Now, cowboy, hit the trail. We have enjoyed your little visit but the time has come for you to take air."

"Not so fast, doc—"

"I mean it. And don't call me 'doc'."

She sounded as if she did mean it. Vikor was aware that the three others had taken up positions in a semi-circle around him. The ax, the shovel and the spade were all held in readiness. Aside from the grimness of their expressions, they were quite attractive girls. Vikor began to laugh.

"There is nothing humorous about this situation," Dr. Watkins said.

"Talk about the Amazons, they had nothing on you girls," Vikor laughed. "If a man you don't like comes along, you chop him down to your size."

"He—he has a gun, Dr. Watkins," the girl with the ax whispered. "I can see it under his coat. Shall I—shall I—" She made motions with the ax.

"No, Cynthia," the ethnologist hastily said. "Not yet."

"I should say not," Vikor added. "I'm astonished that you would even think of such a thing."

"We will not only think about it, we will do it, if you don't leave," Dr. Watkins said. "I think we have made ourselves clear. We don't want you, or anybody else, around."

"Do you have any special reason for desiring privacy, or don't you like my looks?" Vikor queried.

"That's our business," the girl answered.

"Well," said the agent, "I hate to thrust my company on a group of ladies who do not desire it but I came all the way from Washington to talk to you."

"From Washington!" The girl was plainly surprised. "What for?"

"For you to tell me about this." He laid the lacquered box on the packing crate table and opened it.

THE girl picked up the flint spear head, glanced at it, then glanced up at him. There was a tense expression on her face.

"This is a weapon," she said, her voice expressionless. "It is made of flint and it's probably very old. I think, if you took it to a museum, they might give you something for it. Why don't you take it to a museum? It might be quite valuable."

Viktor's face showed great pain. "This is the first time anybody ever thought I was nuts," he said.

The girl flushed.

"That is what you think, isn't it?" Viktor challenged.

"Yes—I mean, No! Oh, I don't know what I mean. If you say you came all the way from Washington just to show me a flint spear head, what else is there for me to think except that you are—that you have a strange sense of values?" she hastily corrected herself.

Viktor produced his badge. It seemed to be the only way he could convince this girl he had a logical reason for being interested in a spear head. The badge produced a marked effect on the four girls. They laid down their weapons and clustered around him. Even Dr. Watkins unbent enough to smile warily.

"Now tell me about this spear head," Viktor said.

The girl examined it again, with a

great deal of care this time. "So far as I can see," she said at last, "it is just an ordinary spear point."

"But that's impossible!" Viktor protested. "A man was killed over that thing. I was slugged because of it." He explained what had happened. The girl stared at him in amazement.

"But we have dozens similar to it," she said. "We find them all around here. Cynthia, will you bring me some of the points we have found?"

Within a few minutes Viktor was looking at a whole collection of spear points. Except for slight variations, they were exactly the same as the one he had brought in the lacquered box!

"This whips me!" he said. "I thought there was something funny about that point, something that an expert would immediately detect. But if they are common objects, why on earth would anyone go to the trouble to try to steal one?"

"I don't know," the bewildered girl said. "I don't understand it at all."

"All right," Viktor said. "We'll move on to the next question. Tell me all you know about Folsom man."

That she was an expert in this field, he recognized as soon as she began to speak. She was a girl—she didn't look to be over twenty-four—but she knew her stuff. "They were a race of hunters who ranged over this section of America thousands of years ago. They depended for their existence largely on the bison herds and other large animals of this region. We have, in our excavations at this site, uncovered stone knives, drills, awls, bone implements, as well as chopped animal bones."

THE sun, slanting toward the west, had dipped below the mountain top. Night was not far off. Viktor's horse cropped at the grass a few feet away. He listened to the girl. She was a good

talker and she was full of her subject. She gave him a clear, comprehensive picture of the activities of a race of stone-age men who had lived among these mountains in the long past.

"One odd thing about this race is that we have never found any skeletons," the girl said.

"How do you account for that?" Viktor asked.

"We don't account for it. It is one of the mysteries we are trying to solve by our excavations." She continued talking. Meanwhile the other girls began to busy themselves with preparations for the evening meal. They went about their task efficiently.

What the devil has a race of stone-age men got to do with the message Renault was trying to deliver? Viktor thought. He was exasperated with his inability to discover any clue that might have meaning. Yet he was convinced there must be a meaning somewhere. Renault, though an amateur at the science, had been a capable ethnologist. And Renault had obviously discovered something about Folsom man that he thought of supreme importance. What the devil was it? What possible connection could there be between a prehistoric race and World War II?

Or had Renault gone insane? Had he cracked up and begun to imagine things?

Viktor discarded that idea as soon as it occurred to him. The attack on him on the steps of the museum had not been the product of an insane imagination. Nor had he imagined the girl with the complexion the color of cream. She was real. And back of this incredible impossibility was something real. He did not in the least doubt but that it was equally sinister. But what was it?

The valley in which the camp was located was now full of shadows. The

fire around which the girls were preparing supper gleamed bright in the dusk. The scene made Viktor think of the picnics he had enjoyed as a youngster. They had been happy, festive occasions. Dr. Watkins was still talking about Folsom man. Viktor was only half listening. He could hear his horse munching grass nearby. Suddenly the sound ceased. The horse snorted.

Viktor sat up. As if by magic a gun appeared in his hand. The girl saw his sudden movement.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Viktor listened. A wind was blowing down the valley, whispering through the firs on the slope above. From the far distance came the hoot of an owl, mournful in the gathering night. There was no other sound. Except for the snorting of the horse, there was nothing at all out of the ordinary.

Viktor had seen nothing. He had heard nothing, except the snort of the horse. But he seemed to be aware, without knowing how he knew it, that danger was suddenly present here in these mountains. Fundamentally, he was a man-hunter, and like all good men in this business, he had developed an intuitive sense that seemed to warn him, now and again, of approaching danger. It did not always warn him. But when it did come, he did not let its subtle whisper go unheeded.

"Is something wrong?" the girl asked again, her voice tense. "Do you see something?"

"No—" said Viktor slowly. "No. I guess not. *Hands up, you!*"

HE was not talking to her. He was speaking to something that had seemed to appear in the gathering dusk. It was the dim shadow of a man. Appearing suddenly from nowhere, he saw it against the tent. His gun centered on it.

At his sharp command, it seemed to freeze. It was looking straight at him.

A fitful blaze from the campfire revealed it clearly. It *was* a man. But he was clad in a short fur coat, he was carrying a spear, and on top of his head, he had horns! Vikor did not doubt but that the horns were part of a head-dress possibly similar to the helmets worn by the ancient Vikings. They were not growing out of the man's head. But, the creature of the night looked like a hunter straight out of the stone age!

Vikor squeezed the trigger of his pistol.

The shot smacked through the night. Simultaneously one of the girls around the campfire screamed. Vikor did not see whether or not his shot went home.

All around the camp, springing up like long-dead ghosts suddenly coming to life, were other men. They were short and squat. They carried clubs and spears. They charged the camp.

Vikor's mad thought was that the Folsom men were somehow coming to life and attacking them. He leaped to his feet. The gun in his hand spat orange flame. He saw Dr. Watkins stand up, take one look at the advancing horde, and grab a camp chair and throw it at them. Around the fire the other girls, after a moment of panic, were grabbing whatever weapons were at hand.

"Give it to 'em, girls!" he yelled.

There were dozens of the creatures. They seemed to be popping up from everywhere. Vikor had no time to wonder where they had come from. He had only time to shoot. Questions could wait until later.

He sensed, rather than heard, a movement behind him. He tried to turn. Something smacked him on the head. Whole planetary systems exploded before his eyes.

He was unconscious before he hit the

ground. The horde of figures swirled over the camp. For a few minutes, screams sounded as the girls tried to fight. Then one by one the screams went into silence. The only sound that remained was the exultant gibbering of squat, powerfully muscled, fur-clad men speaking a strange language.

CHAPTER V

Beyond the Path of the Gods

VIKOR awakened with two sensations foremost in his consciousness. The first and most compelling was that his head felt like it was going to split wide open at any second. The other sensation was of moist coolness, soothing and gratifying, on his forehead. He opened his eyes, and discovered that Dr. Watkins was holding his head in her lap and was applying a water-soaked bandage to his forehead.

"How do you feel?" she asked, when she saw that he had recovered consciousness.

"Like the devil," he answered. "Where are we? What happened?"

He sat up and found himself in a small room with walls of stone. Except for a reed mat on the floor and a jug of water sitting by the door, the place was devoid of furnishings. The other three girls were there. The one who had threatened him with the ax had her arm in a sling and another had a purple bruise on her cheek. Otherwise they seemed unharmed. Their faces were pale and they looked frightened.

"Who were those ogres that seemed to come popping out of the ground?" Vikor bewilderedly asked. "Where did they come from, Dr. Watkins? Do you know what this is all about?"

"My name is Jean," the ethnologist answered. "Only my enemies call me Dr. Watkins and I no longer believe you

are an enemy of mine."

"Thanks, Jean," the agent said. "But you haven't answered my question."

"Ever since I met you, you have done nothing but ask me questions," the girl said. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"I'm sure I'm *not* feeling all right," Vikor answered. "But that doesn't mean you have to try to mother me. What were those things that jumped us?"

"I don't know, but I can guess."

"All right, guess."

"Descendants of the Folsom man!"

"Huh? But—but the Folsom man lived thousands of years ago! You said so yourself."

"That is no reason why their descendants could not be alive today. Since no bones have ever been found, we do not know what the Folsom man looked like, but if he was similar to other dawn races, he was short in stature and very strong. This description fits the ogres that attacked us."

Vikor could not argue with her on this. But there was one flaw in her argument. "But the Folsom men could not be living in Colorado today. They would have been discovered. I grant you there are spots in the mountains that are pretty wild but it has all been explored."

"I know," the girl answered, and there was something pathetic and touching in her voice, something that made him think of a little girl who is desperately afraid but who refuses to show her fear. "But—are we still in Colorado?"

Vikor stared at her. "How long was I unconscious?" he said at last.

"Seven or eight hours."

"Were we put into a plane during that time?"

"No. I was not knocked unconscious so I saw everything that happened, up

until they blindfolded me. They took us into a cave with a concealed entrance, near our camp."

"Then we must be in Colorado," Vikor said. There was no real conviction in his voice.

"I hope so," Jean Watkins said. "But you look out that window and tell me if you ever saw anything like the scene outside in Colorado, or anywhere else in America."

The window was small, a square hole with iron bars across it, and no glass. Vikor stretched himself full length, and looked out.

HE was looking out of a room that was apparently on the side of a cliff. Starting from very near, and going away into the far distance, were mountains capped with snow. Below the snow line were forests of tall pine trees, dark and green. Below the pines were jagged river valleys. The scene that lay before him was beautiful, but there was a remoteness, an alien quality about it, that was vaguely perturbing.

Possibly fifty feet below the window, set on the shoulder of the mountain, was a village. He was looking right down into it. The houses were made of stone and were little more than crude huts. Several of the inhabitants of the village were visible. Short and squat, with round Mongolian faces, wearing sheep-skin coats and the barbaric horned head-dress, they obviously belonged to the same tribe that had attacked them. Several shaggy ponies were in sight, and one horned animal that looked like some strange kind of cow.

Vikor whistled softly. He turned back into the room. The four girls were looking at him.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I—I've ceased thinking," Jean Watkins said.

"I—I want to go home," one of the other girls said abruptly. "I—" She burst into tears and sank to the floor. Jean and the other two began to comfort her. Vikor stood uncomfortably at one side. He knew how that girl felt. He didn't want to go home, not until his job was done, but he would have liked to know in what direction to go to reach home. He did not in the least like what he had seen outside that window. If such a village existed in Colorado, then the state had never been fully explored.

Coming from somewhere, Vikor caught the sound of padding feet. A creak and a rattle as of a heavy bar being removed came from the door. Then the door opened. Two men entered.

The sobs of the girl who wanted to go home went into sudden silence.

The two men were wearing long robes that looked like they were made of felt. Their hands were crossed in front of them and tucked out of sight in voluminous sleeves. Each was wearing a red skull cap. Their faces had a faintly yellowish tinge and there was a slight slant to their eyes.

"They're Mongolians!" Vikor heard Jean Watkins gasp.

The two men bowed to him. By signs, they indicated he was to follow them. Without waiting to see whether he would obey them, they turned and walked out of the room.

Vikor shrugged. "Well, girls," he said. "Take care of yourself while I'm gone." He walked out of the room.

He stepped into a long corridor that had apparently been cut from solid stone. Light was supplied by smouldering torches set in brackets along the walls. The air was heavy with the pungency of incense. In the distance he could hear the slow throbbing of a gong that sounded like the muffled toll-

ing of a funeral bell

The two men led him into a huge chamber. Here the odor of incense was more pronounced and here the torches were brighter, supplying more illumination. Standing stiffly around the wall were guards armed with lances and curved swords. Seated on reed mats were several men who stared incuriously at him as he entered. Vikor scarcely glanced at them. At the far end of the room was a platform raised a few feet above the floor. It was a dais, the place for the throne of a king. A throne was on it but the throne was not occupied by a king. A queen sat in the heavy chair. Clad almost entirely in pearls and ornaments, she was the most nearly naked woman Vikor had ever seen in public. One ornament, suspended on a chain around her neck, held his attention.

It was a flint spear head.

ONE of the men rose from his squatting position as Vikor entered.

"Princess Neva gives you permission to approach her," he hissed. Vikor glanced at the fellow, and stiffened. On the right cheek of the man was an angry red blotch about the size of the end of a pencil.

"I am Kavor," the man said, his eyes glinting angrily. "I see you recognize the mark you placed upon me!"

"You're the fellow who tried to pull a gun on me on the steps of the museum!" Vikor gasped.

"Yes," Kavor said. "Now you may approach the princess."

A strip of red carpet led directly across the room and up the dais to the throne chair. Vikor walked along the carpet. He stopped at the foot of the dais. The princess looked down at him.

"Hello," she said, in excellent if not perfect English.

She was the girl with the perfect complexion from whom he had stolen the spear point in the plane! She ruled here; in this mad world she was a princess. He stared at her, wondering whether she was friendly. Her face was composed, revealing nothing.

"It's nice to meet you again," Vikor said. "I see you recovered the little bauble I filched from you at our last meeting."

He suspected he was sticking his neck out a mile but there was nothing to be gained by trying to pretend he did not recognize this girl. She would certainly recognize him. The fact that she spoke to him in English indicated that she had probably already recognized him. Since she was here, a princess in this impossible place, she certainly knew the answers to a thousand questions that had plagued him. If he talked just right, with just the proper blending of daring and deference, if he pretended to know the answers already, there was an excellent chance that he might learn something.

"This?" she glanced down at the spear point nestling just above the rise of her breasts. "Oh, yes. My followers attacked your camp to recover it. It was not good for the key to the land of the Angry God to remain in foreign hands."

The key to the land of the Angry God! This thing was a key of some kind! Vikor controlled his amazement.

"I can well understand that," he said ruefully. "But, to be frank, I did not know how to use the key."

"You didn't?" There was surprise in her voice. Vikor cursed himself. He was daring much in an effort to learn a little. Had he dared too much?

"Did not your countryman, did not this Renault who stole the key from me, did he not tell you how to use it?"

Vikor's heart leaped. Renault had been here! Renault had stolen this spear point!

"I asked you a question!" the princess said.

Not until then did Vikor realize he had been hesitating. He caught the sudden silence that fell over the room as they waited for his answer. Should he say that Renault had told him about the spear point? Should he try to stall? Or should he stick to the truth? It was no easy decision to make. He had the feeling that his life depended on the way he answered it.

He took a deep breath. "Captain Renault died before he had a chance to reveal anything," he said. He didn't dare risk a falsehood. He didn't dare try to stall.

When he spoke, all over the room the tension seemed to relax. The face of the girl on the throne lost some of its grimness.

"Good," she said. "We did not know how much this Renault had revealed. We were afraid he had told too much."

VIKOR kept his feelings under control. The girl who sat on the throne was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Yet when she had learned that Renault had died before he had had a chance to speak, her comment had been, "Good!" Princess Neva was beautiful. There was no doubt about that. The markings on the back of a snake, regarded from the purely artistic viewpoint of color and design, were also beautiful!

A voice, speaking a harsh twisting tongue that Vikor did not understand, spoke from behind him. He turned his head. A short, evil-faced man was speaking. He had the slant eyes and the round face of the Mongolian. From the tone of his voice he was vehemently urging some course of action. His

speech was short but apparently very pointed. It was addressed to the princess. Apparently it was received with little favor for her reply was short and angry.

"Nish thinks you are lying," she said to Viktor. "He urges that we destroy you. However I think we can guess his motives with ease."

She left her enigmatic statement unexplained. Nish took her refusal with sullen silence.

"Would you mind telling me how you learned to speak English?" Viktor asked.

"My followers from time to time have captured men in your land," Princess Neva said. "I learned it from them. Do I not speak it well?"

"You speak it very well," Viktor answered. "Now, with your permission, there is one more question I would like to ask."

"You may ask it."

"Where am I?"

"Don't you know?"

"Frankly, I do not."

"If Renault had revealed what he knew, you certainly would have known," the princess said, glancing triumphantly at Nish. "I will answer your question. You are on the Roof of the World."

"On what?" Viktor gasped.

Her laughter chimed through the room. "In your language this land is called Tibet."

"But—" Viktor caught himself. Renault had been in Tibet, the village he had seen from his prison cell looked as if it belonged in Asia, these people were obviously Mongolians. Every straw of evidence he had pointed in the same direction, toward Tibet, *except* that it was impossible for him, or anyone else to reach Tibet from Colorado in the space of six or seven hours. And Jean Watkins had said he had been

unconscious no longer than that.

"How can I have been in Colorado a few hours ago and be in Tibet now?" he asked.

The girl on the throne laughed again. "You were brought through the Land of the Angry God," she said.

"And what is that?" Viktor questioned.

The smile left her face. Even in the dim light he saw a shudder pass over her body. "I do not know," she said. "No one knows. It is a pathway made by the gods in the long ago. We enter into a cave here in Tibet. We pass through a place that is filled with smoke and mist, where there are choking vapors, where a false step means death. In a few hours we come out of the cave—and we are in the land that you call Colorado!"*

VIKOR rocked back on his heels.

He had no doubt but that the Princess Neva was telling the truth. That she had little or no understanding of the truth about the passage she called the path of the gods, did not matter. Viktor did not understand it either. But he did understand why Renault had thought his discovery of this passageway was of tremendous importance. There was war in the world. In China,

*Land of the Angry God.—Unquestionably what is involved here is a transit through the fourth dimension. Princess Neva had no real understanding of the process and her superstitious fears kept her from thinking too much about it. In effect, a person entered a cave in Tibet. After spending several hours underground, he came out—in Colorado. It sounds simple, and the description is easy to put into words, but only a mathematician, with pages of equations at his command, could give a true picture of the tremendous mystery involved. The actual path went deep into the ground, passing near a subterranean volcano. The combination of volcanic heat and extreme earth pressure in some way caused the dimensional transit. Thus, unknown to anyone except a group of priests in Tibet who guarded the secret, a short, comparatively easy passage existed between Asia and America.—ED.

which lay to the east of Tibet, were embattled armies. In the land of the Dragon millions of men wanted arms. The Burma Road was closed. All other roads were difficult and slow.

Would the path of the gods provide a quick and easy way to get arms to China? Could tanks pass through the transit across the dimensions? Artillery? Machine guns? Crated airplanes? The sons of the Dragon needed weapons. Vikor did not in the least doubt but that weapons could be given to them in this way. He could imagine what would happen to the Jappos if the arsenals of America were only a few hours from China! Arms for the sons of the Dragon! Wings for the men of China! Tanks for them!

Look out, Tokyo! You have taken the Dragon by the tail. Now try and let go!

Vikor rocked back on his heels. Captain Renault had made a discovery of tremendous importance.

"My people found the path to your land thousands of years ago," the princess said. "They used it to reach their hunting grounds in America. Twice a year they held great hunts in your mountains, killing thousands of bison and bringing the meat back here." *

"I am amazed that no one in my land has ever discovered the path," Vikor said. He was stalling while he tried to decide what to do.

"The exit in your country is well hid-

* This solves the mystery of the appearance of the Folsom men in America. They found, and came through the dimensional transit, using America as hunting grounds. The ethnologists have been unable to find their bones because the hunters did not stay in America, returning to Asia at the end of each hunting season. The ethnologists, finding weapons and bones in the places where great buffalo herds had been slaughtered, where the meat had been dressed and dried, were puzzled by the total absence of any human burials. A hunter who died in America was taken back to Asia for burial.—Ed.

den," Princess Neva said. "And here, our forefathers in the long ago built massive doors to close the entrance, doors that open only to those who have the proper key. It would not be easy to use the path of the gods without our permission."

"I imagine it would not be easy," Vikor said. He knew what he had to do. Somehow he must return to America with the information he now possessed. Once they were shown the exit of the path of the gods, a regiment of the lads in khaki would go through—or hell would come apart if they were stopped. But first they had to be shown the exit. How am I going to get out of this joint? How am I going to give these slugs the slip? Vikor's thoughts were racing ahead of him.

"It not only is not easy, it is impossible," Princess Neva said. "You would not be wise to attempt it, if that is what you are thinking. Besides," she smiled coyly at him, "you come here at a good time. I am sure, when you learn the good fortune in store for you, that you would not think of going away."

BEFORE Vikor could ask what she meant, a hissing voice broke in. It was Nish, protesting again. He was trying to be polite about his protest, but a feeling of vicious anger showed through his politeness.

The girl in the throne chair silenced him with a single harsh sentence. She smiled at Vikor. "I said before that we could guess the motives of Nish. He does not want a competitor for me."

"He doesn't want anyone to compete with him for you!" Vikor gasped.

"Yes," Princess Neva said. "According to the laws of my fathers, when the high priestess reaches the age of twenty, she must take a husband. Any man may challenge for the right to win her. Nish has challenged for that right, and be-

fore you came, no one dared to dispute it with him. Now that you are here—" She smiled and left the rest of the sentence unfinished.

Vikor understood her meaning all too clearly. He was being invited to challenge for the right to marry this pagan queen!* She was beautiful, no question about that, but he was definitely not interested in having her as a wife. However, he suspected it would not be wise to express his opinion aloud.

"A challenge implies a conflict," he said slowly. "Would you tell me the nature of this conflict?"

"Gladly will I tell you," Neva said, with every sign of relish on her face. "First you will fight, with bows and arrows, each man being given three arrows. If both of you live, you will fight with spears, each of you being given one spear. You will fight with spears for one day. If both are alive at the end of that day, on the third day you will fight with swords. The one who survives will have the right to become my husband!"

It was the pagan rite of trial by combat in which the strong survived and the weak perished.

"And if I do not choose to accept this challenge?" Vikor said.

"In that case, my men will chop off your head," the girl said angrily. "I may also choose who shall have the right to fight for me. And I choose you. If you do not wish to accept the challenge of battle—" She drew her hand across his throat. "—Snick, like that!"

Silence fell over the room as they waited for his answer. The guards,

standing with their backs against the wall, did not stir; but Vikor thought he caught an eager glint in their eyes as if they were anxious to do what their queen commanded.

"I accept the challenge," Vikor said. "Then this audience is ended," Neva said. She spoke quickly to her guards. As they escorted Vikor back to his cell, he knew he had either to fight for the hand of this pagan princess or find some way to escape. He would escape if he could. He would fight if he had to, hoping that after he won—if he won—he would be in a better position to carry the information he now possessed back to America.

When he got back to his cell, he found it empty. The four girls were gone.

"What the devil happened to them?" he thought.

He tried to ask the men guarding him what had happened to the girls. But they either did not understand English or they chose not to talk.

Unceremoniously they locked him in the cell, alone.

CHAPTER VI

Trial by Battle

A CLAMOR of gongs awakened Vikor from a restless sleep. Food and water had been provided for him and he had been left strictly alone. Desperately tired, he had gone to sleep. Now he was awakened by the clanging of gongs. The sound came from outside the building. He went to the window and looked out.

Directly below him was a group of excited natives. Nish was one of them. Nish was not excited. He was holding a short but very heavy bow in one hand. In the other hand he held three arrows. He seemed very nonchalant.

"What's cooking out there?" Vikor

* Among primitive peoples, wives are frequently bought from their fathers. Apparently this was not true among these Mongolian descendants of the Folsom men. When a girl reached the age of marriage, the men who wanted her could challenge for her, the winner of the ensuing fight getting her. This is a direct application of the law of survival. The weak, eliminated from the right to have wives, would leave no descendants.—Ed.

said to himself. "The little lady intimated that I was to fight for her fair hand with bows and arrows—is the fight ready to start?"

The thought sent a chill through him. He watched the proceedings with great interest.

The sound of the gongs came again. Two men, at a signal from Nish, pounded the heavy brass gongs, sending the brazen booming roars echoing across the mountains. Nish walked back and forth. Now and again he glanced surreptitiously up at the window of the cell where Vikor was imprisoned. It was not until he caught a glimpse of the American that he gave a signal for the performance to start.

The natives instantly gathered in a group well away from Nish and at one side, where they formed a knot of eager watchers. Nish was left standing in the open. Twenty or thirty feet away two men, standing beside a small wicker cage, watched him. Nish carefully fitted an arrow to his bow, nodded at the two men.

They opened a compartment in the wicker cage, reached inside and took out a small hawk, which they tossed into the air. The bird instantly took wing. Screaming, it darted swiftly upward, toward freedom. It was a gray mass of beating wings hurtling toward the sky.

Thrrrrmm!

The bow string hummed as Nish released the arrow. The hawk seemed to explode in mid-air. Feathers flew out from it. Its wings sagged. For a split second, carried by its momentum, it seemed to try to rise. Trailing feathers,

it fell to earth.

The arrow had transfixed it.

A shout of applause greeted the performance.

Nish nonchalantly fitted another arrow to his bow. He gave no sign that he heard the shouts of approval from the men around him. He waved at the two men standing beside the cage.

They released another hawk. It hurled itself upward toward the sky. The bow string hummed again.

The hawk fluttered madly, trying to carry the arrow away with it, then sagged downward.

The thunder of applause was louder this time. Nish seemed to swell slightly.



The bow string thrummed as Nish released the arrow. The arrow struck the hawk . . .



Otherwise he gave no indication that he had heard. He signaled again to the men at the cage.

They released a third hawk.

Thrrrrmm! went the string of the bow. Feathers spewed outward from the flying bird, but it kept on flying. The arrow had merely grazed it and had inflicted no serious injury. The bird had been nicked but it flew away.

The natives shouted their applause. The third shot had been a close miss, which suited them. It did not suit Nish. He glared angrily at the disappearing bird, then threw his bow on the ground, and stalked away shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"SWEET PETE!" Vikor gasped.

"That guy gets two out of three dead center and the third one knocks feathers. He's mad because he didn't get the third one clean. He must have cut his teeth on the stave of a bow."

It was the most marvelous exhibition of archery the American had ever seen.

"That is the guy I'm supposed to fight!" Vikor thought. He had not had his hands on a bow since he was a kid. He could not hit the side of a barn with an arrow and he knew it.

Vikor sat down on a mat. His hand went automatically to the holster that

had held his gun. The pistol had been removed while he was unconscious, as he well knew, but he still could not help wishing he had it.

The pad of feet sounded in the corridor outside and the door opened. Vikor looked up. Kavor entered. Four guards with drawn swords entered behind him.

"You are feeling well?" Kavor inquired. He seemed to relish the question.

"Very well, thank you," Vikor answered. "And you?"

The coolness of the answer seemed to amaze the Mongol. He took another tack. "Did you see Nish practicing at targets?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Vikor said.

"Expert bowman is Nish," Kavor said. "In own land, Nish is champion. But you saw him shoot. There is no need for me to tell you how expert he is with bow."

"No need," Vikor agreed. He was certain of one thing: Kavor was not going to get his goat. "I quite agree with you as to his expertness with the bow."

"Is good," Kavor said. "You, also, are a great bowman, no doubt?"

"One of the best," Vikor said firmly. If this conversation was designed to break his nerve, he'd be damned if he let it succeed.

"Is good indeed," Kavor said. "We came to prepare you for the test with Nish."

For the space of seconds, Vikor did not move. He sat immobile on the reed mat, his face completely expressionless. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see the four guards with drawn swords. The metal was bright and the edges of the blades seemed to have been honed to razor sharpness. His hand went to his empty holster. He got to his feet.

"Okay, Butch," he said. "I'm ready."

"'Butch?'" Kavor echoed. "Do not know what 'butch' means."

"Skip it," said Viktor. "You wouldn't know even if I told you. If you came here to prepare me, then do it."

Kavor looked a little annoyed. The attempt to make his victim squirm with fear had failed.

The preparations were simple. Viktor was stripped naked, then provided with a length of cloth to gird his loins and a pair of rough sandals for his feet.

"Is this all I get?" he asked.

"The bow and three arrows you will receive from the hand of the Neva," Kavor answered. "What more is it that you want?"

"A suit of armor," Viktor said promptly. "However, I don't expect to get it."

"You won't get it," Kavor said. "Of courage, this is a test."

"So I understood," the American answered. "Lead on, Macduff."

THEY lead him away. Kavor and one guard went ahead. The three other guards followed close behind. Viktor's manner indicated he was about three-quarters asleep and was taking little interest in what was happening but he had never been more alert in his life. No cat ever watched a mouse hole as closely as he was watched. He was given no opportunity to escape.

Kavor led him into a large arena. Entering from below, he looked up at a semi-circle of faces. The arena was only partly filled. Apparently it had been built when this race numbered more people. Now the Folsom men were diminishing in numbers. No longer could they fill their stadium. Viktor, looking around him, felt like a gladiator in the Colosseum of ancient Rome. He was suddenly aware that Kavor and the guards, after escorting him into the arena, had disappeared, leaving him alone.

A blast of trumpets greeted his appearance.

Princess Neva sat on a throne on one side of the arena. She smiled down at Viktor. The spectators applauded him, then began to look him over carefully as if they were estimating his condition and hence his chances of coming out of the arena alive. He could not understand their speech but he had the impression they were betting on whether or not he would win.

"I wonder what the odds are?" he thought grimly.

Another blast of trumpets sounded.

Through a door set low in the opposite wall, Nish entered. He, too, had been stripped to the waist. His short, powerful body and his heavy shoulders made him look like a wrestler. He grinned and bowed to the crowd.

A thunderous roar went up. It continued for minutes as the spectators leaped to their feet to applaud. Viktor listened to the sound.

"Nish must be the favorite," he said to himself. "They make more noise for him than they do for me."

Eventually the shouting and the clapping died down. Princess Neva beckoned them to approach her dais. Nish strode confidently forward. Viktor walked more slowly. He was in no hurry. So far as he could see, he was not going to be able to do much more walking and there was no point in hurrying the few steps he had left.

Neva leaned down. To Nish she handed a bow and three arrows. She made the same present to Viktor. The bows were short and stubby and were reinforced with horn strips. They were already strung. They were similar to the old Mongol bows, which the horde of Genghis Khan had used when that tribe of ferocious fighters had swept out of Asia, crushing all who had stood before them. An efficient and deadly

weapon, these bows.

"You will each retire to the far ends of the arena," Princess Neva instructed. "When the trumpets sound, you will start approaching each other. You will continue to approach, firing your arrows as you will. Are you ready?"

Nish promptly bowed low to signify his willingness. He was not only ready, he was eager. With nothing to fear, this was not a conflict to him. He was an expert with the bow. A single arrow would be all he needed.

"Ready, princess," he said.

"What about you, American man?" Neva asked, looking archly at Viktor.

"What is the purpose of this nonsense?" Viktor said. "If you want to kill me, why don't you call out your headsman and have him use his ax?"

"Oh, but I do not want to kill you," the girl answered. "I want you to have a chance."

"And your idea of giving me a chance is to match me against an expert archer?" Viktor said bitterly.

"It is the law of my fathers that each man shall be given weapons and shall fight with those weapons—"

"Damn the law of your fathers!"

PRINCESS NEVA looked partly angry and partly pleased. She seemed to approve of this defiance, possibly for the same reason that the fans at a bull fight approve of a spirited bull—because it means a better fight.

"There must be a battle," she said. "If either of you refuse to fight—" She waved her hand in a signal.

She was leaning forward on her dais looking down at the two men in the arena. A wall about twelve feet high circled the stadium. At her signal archers appeared on the wall. They drew their bows, centered their arrows impartially on Viktor and Nish.

"No one is forced to fight against his

will," she said. "He always has the choice of dying. Are you ready?"

Viktor shrugged. He turned and walked to the other end of the stadium. He turned again. The arena was not large. It was not over fifty yards to where Nish was standing. Nish had already fitted an arrow to his bow. He had not drawn the string as yet—he was waiting for the sound of the trumpets to do that—Viktor could see the grin of triumph on his face.

Over the assembled throng, a hush fell. Faces turned downward, they were entirely absorbed in the drama about to take place below them.

The silver note of the trumpets rang through the air.

Viktor fitted an arrow to his bow. He started walking forward. He made no attempt to shoot. There was still an air of nonchalance about him. He was watching Nish.

The American agent had one hope—that he could dodge the arrows that would come at him. It was a slender hope. It meant that he would have to wait until after the arrow was released, then dodge aside before it reached him. It would be fairly easy to do this once. But the second time, Nish would be on the alert for it. Nish had hit hawks on the fly. He could certainly hit a man who was trying to dodge. If by some miracle Viktor could escape three arrows—

Nish was walking toward him. The distance between them was forty yards, then it was thirty yards. Nish stopped. Viktor saw him bring the bow string to his ear. Now was the time!

Craaccck!

A sharp splintering sound echoed through the arena. For a second Viktor was startled. This was not the hum of a bow string. Then he saw the source of the sound.

Nish, an expression of perplexity that

was rapidly changing to fear on his face, was staring at the broken bow he was holding. The sharp splintering sound had come from it. When he had drawn his bow, it had broken.

Vikor stopped dead still. He had prayed for a miracle. And a miracle had happened! Nish was weaponless. He could walk up to the man, walk so close there was no chance of missing, and drive an arrow through him.

A fierce shout came from the crowd. Apparently they were urging him to do just that. Vikor discarded the idea instantly. He could not kill an unarmed man. It was not a part of his heritage.

"A new bow!" Nish shrieked at Neva. "Give me a new bow."

Looking wildly at Vikor, he ran back and stood in front of the dias, begging for a new weapon.

The crowd pointed at him, and making motions that indicated the drawing and releasing of an arrow, urged Vikor to shoot him. The American shook his head. But he started toward the box occupied by the girl, intending to urge her to stop this fight.

NISH completely misinterpreted Vikor's intentions. He thought the American was merely getting close enough so there was no chance of missing. That was what *he* would do, if the circumstances were reversed.

"Quickly, my princess, a bow," he shouted.

"Each man shall be given weapons and shall fight with those weapons," she coldly answered.

"But my weapon has broken!"

"It makes no difference! The gods did not wish you to win me. Therefore they broke your bow."

"But he will kill me!"

"What of it?" her voice was harsh.

"You will not help me?" Nish shouted.

"Of course not, you fool! Die like the dog that you are! Vikor!" she called to the American. "Shoot him!"

Vikor heard the command. He had no intention of obeying it. Nish did not know this. He glanced wildly at the American, then turned and ran across the arena toward the door where he had entered.

A roar of disapproval shook the stadium. The crowd wanted to see a fight, they wanted to see blood, to see a man die, to hear his groans. Nish was running. The crowd felt it was being cheated.

Nish threw himself against the door, kicked it open, plunged through and out of sight. He was running like a man with the fear of death upon him.

Guards came piling into the arena. They escorted Vikor to the princess.

"You should have killed him," the girl icily said.

Vikor made no attempt to explain. This barbaric princess had no conception of ethics. To her, an enemy who was down was an enemy to be destroyed. Mercy was not in her vocabulary.

"I didn't kill him," Vikor answered. "What is next on the program—the fight with spears?"

Night was near. The fight with spears would have to be postponed until the next day. Vikor's one hope was that it would be postponed. That would give him a night in which to try to escape. Try to escape, hell! He had to escape! A miracle had saved him once. There would not be two miracles. He waited for the girl to answer.

"The fight is over," she said. "You are the winner!"

"W—what?" Vikor gasped.

"Nish ran," she said. "When he ran, you became the winner." Her mood changed. When she had criticized him for not killing Nish, she had been icy.

Now she gazed fondly at the American. "What is the matter, my lord? The wedding feast will be tonight. Does not the thought of winning me please you?"

Viktor's composure had completely deserted him. He had steelled himself to the thought of another fight. Now he learned there would be no battle with spears. He had won! True, in winning the right to marry this princess, he had acquired a privilege of doubtful merit, but the important fact was that now he would have a chance to escape.

He did not in the least doubt that he would be able to escape. As the prospective husband of their princess, they could not well lock him in a cell. They might guard him, but he could evade the guards. If in the meantime, he could wangle the key to the gates that barred passage to the path of the gods—

A surge of vast relief flooded through him. He wasn't free yet but now he had a fighting chance!

"I am honored," he said, bowing to the princess. "I am honored, indeed!

CHAPTER VII

The Secret of the Flint Spear

THERE were two things that puzzled and perturbed Viktor, two questions to which he must have answers before he could attempt to escape.

They were in the throne room where he had been brought for his first reception with the princess. The air of the huge room was filled with smoke. Off to one side three men were whanging on cymbals and three others were blowing on long horns. They thought they were making music. The room was jammed with men squatting cross-legged on mats and carpets. Huge platters of food had been brought in and great quantities of a spiced, heady wine. It was the wedding feast. The Mongols

who were not already drunk were fast getting that way. Viktor tasted the wine each time the horn passed him. Merely tasted it, though he pretended to drink deep. He was patiently waiting for the occupants of the place to get themselves thoroughly soused. Meanwhile there were two things that worried him. He turned to Neva, seated at his side. Each time a horn of wine passed, she did it full justice. Viktor regarded her ability to down the stuff with admiration if not with liking.

"If I may be permitted to ask, what became of the four girls who were with me when I was captured?" he asked.

"Anything is now permitted of my lord," the princess answered. "As to the girls, I do not know that anything has happened to them."

"They were not in my cell when I was returned to it."

"Ah! Well, I do not know. Does my lord desire me to find out?"

Viktor nodded.

She called one of the guards to her, spoke rapidly to him in her own language. The man left the room. In a few minutes he returned.

"He says he does not know what happened to them," the princess said, after listening to the guard. "He thinks a jinn got them. He says they vanished and no one has seen them. Perhaps they escaped. If my lord desires, I will have them hunted."

"No," Viktor said quickly. "It is not important." His heart leaped at the news. The four girls had escaped! This left him free to act without worrying about them. If they could escape, they could look out for themselves, for the time being at least. Later, he would hunt for them.

"Does my lord desire them for concubines?" the princess cattily asked.

"No," Viktor hastily answered. "Oh, no. I doubt if they would make good

concubines." In spite of himself, he grinned. He wondered what Jean Watkins would say if she knew she had been offered to him as a concubine!

"They would not be much good," the princess agreed. "Too skinny!" She was slightly tight.

Vikor quickly changed the subject. The morals, or absence of them, of these people shocked even him.

"There is another matter that has puzzled me for a long time," he said. "Am I permitted to speak about it?"

"Certainly." The princess nodded vigorously. "What is it?"

VIKOR pointed to the spear head dangling on its chain around her neck. "You told me that this was the key to the gates that guard the land of the angry god. How can a spear point be a key to anything?"

The princess laughed. "My lord is teasing me," she said.

"Not at all," Vikor answered. "I am greatly puzzled. How can a spear point be a key to anything?"

"I will show you," she said, taking the chain and the point from around her neck. Holding it in both hands, she pressed gently on three different places. There was a soft click. The spear point opened up.

It was not a spear point. It was a box, made of flint and constructed by some exceedingly clever workman who had designed it to look like the head of a spear. Inside it was a small key of a strange design.

"Well, damn me for a fool for not thinking of that!" said Vikor. "I almost wore out my brains trying to understand why that thing could be so important and I never once thought there might be something inside it. Let me see it." The girl handed it to him.

He examined it carefully. When it was closed, the edges fitted so neatly

together that only a microscope would have revealed the place where the lid was hinged.

"That is certainly an expert job!" Vikor said admiringly.

"In the old days my people were great workers in stone and metal," the princess said. "They knew many secrets that we have now forgotten. What is it, my lord?"

Vikor, still holding the spear point in his hands, was not listening to her. His head was cocked to one side.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked. The princess listened. "No, my lord," she answered. "I hear nothing. What is it that is caught by the keen ears of my lord?"

"I would say it sounds like a fleet of trucks climbing a hill a mile away," he answered. "But there are no trucks in this country. I guess my ears are playing tricks on me, or possibly that potent wine is making me hear things that do not exist. Here, my princess, is your spear point. Guard it well." He laughed and handed the ornament back to her. She put it back around her neck.

The key was in Vikor's hand and the hand was carelessly thrust out of sight under the heavy felt robe that had been given him. During the moment when her attention was distracted, he had palmed it.

He had the key to the path of the gods, to the fourth dimensional transitional passageway that would, in a few short hours, take him back to America! All he had to do was to wait until this long-lost tribe of Mongols got too drunk to notice what was happening. From the way they were soaking up the wine, that would not be very long. Vikor prepared to wait.

Princess Neva turned to him. "My lord," she said, a look of perplexity on her face, "now I hear those trucks that

you mentioned a few minutes ago."

"You do?" Vikor said. He listened. When he had first called her attention to the sound, all he had heard was a dim rumble in the distance. He had thought nothing of it. It had merely been an excuse to distract her attention while he palmed the key within the hollow spear head. Now the sound came again. It was clearer now, stronger. There was no mistaking its origin. No other mechanism on earth could quite imitate the roar of an internal combustion motor.

Trucks were roaring in the mountains of Tibet!

IT WAS impossible! There were no roads into this country, and the mountain trails were scarcely passable on horseback.

Vikor got to his feet. Motors were roaring somewhere out in the night. The sound could not be coming from a fleet of trucks.

Then what was it coming from?

As he arose, there was a commotion outside. A sentry came stumbling into the room. He flung himself on the floor in front of the princess and shouted a string of unintelligible words. Even in the poor light, Vikor saw the girl's face whiten.

"What is it?" he asked.

Neva sprang to her feet. "Nish!" she said excitedly. "Nish is attacking—*with tanks!*"

"Where would Nish get tanks?"

"I do not know. I did not know he had them. Perhaps he brought them in, a few at a time, from the north, where his armies are—"

"*Where his armies are?*" Vikor gasped. "What the devil are you talking about? Where would Nish get an army?"

"From Japan, of course. That is where he came from, he and the rest of

his monkey men—Oh, my lord, I forgot that you do not know about Nish. He is a Jappo."

"I gathered that much," Vikor said grimly. "But what was he doing here?"

"Seeking the entrance to the path of the gods!" the girl promptly answered. "Oh, he never came out and said so, but that was what he wanted. That was why he challenged to win me—because that was the easiest way he could obtain the key to the gates and could gain control of our other secrets."

Vikor groaned. At last he saw the whole picture, the situation that Renault had discovered and had tried so hard to reveal. The Japs had sniffed out the existence of the fourth dimensional passage to America. They had realized the opportunity offered!

Along the pathway of the gods an army could go to the heart of America, tanks, planes, guns, uncounted thousands of men. No United States patrol plane would ever spot their coming, no far-flung watcher on the ramparts ever give warning of their approach. They would come in secret, and in the wilderness of the Rockies, lay out secret air fields, hidden bases. America would be struck from within!

In the split part of a second, Vikor saw the whole hideous plot. The instant he knew that Nish was a Jap, he saw the devilish scheme that was working out. The battle for America would be fought here in the heart of Tibet. Armageddon was here! The roar of the motors of the tanks came louder. Armageddon was now!

"Is there any possible way to stop those tanks?" he demanded.

Before he asked the question, he suspected there was no answer to it. Mongols, armed with bows and arrows, Mongols fighting with spears—if they were willing to fight at all—would never stop a tank charge. Never!

The girl's answer came as a tremendous surprise.

"Of course," she said contemptuously. "That was why Nish attempted to win me, so he could gain by stealth what he was not strong enough to take by attack. Do you think we are defenseless here? I tell you that Nish is attacking in desperation now, in the forlorn hope that he can win by strength what he failed to gain by treachery. I tell you Nish will never win."

She seemed very sure of herself, very certain of her meaning.

"But tanks—you can't stop tanks with bows and arrows!"

"We shall not fight them with bows and arrows!" Princess Neva said.

THE Mongols in the room were already coming to their feet. The princess issued swift orders to them in their language. Shouts rolled through the throne room. Fists were shaken. Food and drink were forgotten.

They were willing to fight, Vikor saw. But what good would all their willingness do?

At the girl's command, they began to stream from the room.

"I sent them to the place of storage, for weapons," she explained to Vikor. "Come. We will watch Nish meet destruction."

"How in the devil are you going to manage it?" Vikor demanded. "Don't you understand—tanks are coming? Don't you know what tanks are—They have walls of steel and guns that shoot very hard and very fast. Anyone who tries to stand in front of them will be struck down and crushed. They are one of the most deadly weapons ever invented."

He suspected she did not know what tanks were.

"I know about tanks," she said. "We will stop them. Come and watch."

She seemed to know what she was talking about, to have no doubt about the final outcome. Vikor followed her. She led him through a devious series of passages to a balcony overlooking the edge of the city.

Once, in the long ago, there must have been thousands of inhabitants of this hidden city. The houses, clustered against the wall of the overhanging mountains, were numerous enough to indicate thousands of inhabitants. But most of them were deserted now.

The time was close to midnight. Overhead in the sky was a moon nearing the full. Its light illumined the fallen houses of this long lost city. Its light also revealed a broad road circling the side of the mountain, leading up from the valley below.

The road must have been thousands of years old. It had been cut from the side of the mountain and had been designed for the use of men on foot and men on horseback. Hunters had gone down this road, warriors, fighters, in the long ago. No four-wheeled vehicle, certainly no vehicle with treads, had ever passed over it.

Vehicles with treads were coming over it now. Far down the road Vikor caught a glimpse of a moving blotch—a tank coming up the road. The blue flames from its exhaust were clearly visible. A second followed it, and a third. The thunder of the straining motors was loud in the night.

"What are your men going to do—roll stones down on them from above?" Vikor questioned.

"We will roll no stones," the princess answered. "As to the rest, wait and see."

The tanks were closer now. It was a steep grade they were climbing and their progress was not over a few miles an hour. But they moved relentlessly, never stopping. They were already

within machine-gun range. The princess glanced nervously toward the rear.

"Your men seem to be delayed," Viktor said.

Not a Mongol had as yet put in an appearance.

"They will come. Ah! There they are!" A single shout had come from the city. As if it was a signal, other shouts answered it. Viktor saw hundreds of Mongols streaming toward the road. Looking at them, he abruptly caught his breath.

They were carrying something. He could not see what it was. They seemed to find the objects awkward to carry. A slow trot was as fast as they could move.

Viktor saw what they were carrying. "Transits!" he hissed.

BACK in Washington, half a world and seemingly years away, Colonel Fiske had been searching for a man with a transit. Until now, Viktor had only suspected that some weapon that looked like a transit had been used to kill Captain Renault. When he had come to this world, and had seen only bows and arrows, spears, and swords, he had assumed that this suspicion had been without foundation. Now he knew the suspicion was correct.

"What are those things?" he demanded.

"The weapons of the burning death," the princess answered.

"But where did they come from? I mean—your people have been using bows and arrows—"

"Our forefathers discovered them long ago," the girl answered. "They made many of them, including a huge one which they hid inside the land of the Angry God to guard the gates. You saw none of them because we use them only in moments of great danger. Nish knew that they existed. They were an-

other reason why he came here. Because he knew of them, he sought to win me, and with me the right to use the path of the gods and the weapons of the burning death. He attacks now in desperation, knowing he cannot win."

"And while he attacks, I'm going to get to hell out of here," Viktor thought grimly.

Now, even more than ever, he knew he had to escape. This strange, tripod-mounted weapon that looked like a surveyor's transit, if it would stop a tank charge, was desperately important. The nation that possessed its secret, might easily be victorious in the war.

The tanks were charging up the steep road. The Mongols were hastily setting up the tripods.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! A machine-gun began to fire from the first tank.

One of the Mongols screamed and pitched forward. At the same moment an almost invisible beam of radiation flickered downward. It came from one of the transits. It touched the tank, flashed away as the operator momentarily missed his aim, then came quickly back. Striking the nose of the tank, it held there.

Something clinked softly. The tank kept coming. Viktor held his breath. Had the weapon failed?

Abruptly one of the tank treads ceased turning. The armored monster clawed in a semi-circle. The road was not wide. Beyond its outer edge, protected by nothing but a low retaining wall, was a drop of hundreds of feet. The tank surged forward. The operator was either dead or badly wounded. The tank was out of control. It lifted its nose over the retaining wall, seemed to pause there for a split second, then slowly toppled over.

Seconds later the thundering crash

came back from far below.*

Princess Neva was shouting exultation in her own language. The sight of the battle seemed to release every inhibition she possessed.

"See, my lord!" she cried. "We have destroyed the first tank!"

Before Viktor could answer, an explosion blasted the night. The second tank had been struck, but unlike the first, this one had exploded. Great tongues of fire leaped upward and spread out. A few seconds later crashes sounded around them as bits of falling metal began to hit the ground.

"There is a third tank!" Princess Neva cried to her men. "Get it!"

The driver of the third tank had seen what had happened to the first two. He had no stomach for any more of this style of combat. Stopping one tread and turning full power on the other, he spun his heavy vehicle around in a circle, and started back down the sloping road. On the down-grade he went much faster.

"Don't let him escape!" the princess shouted.

Beams of light were flicking down-

* Disintegration as well as burning was involved in the beam thrown by this weapon. Mere heat would not tear a hole through the steel walls of a tank so quickly, if, indeed, it could be concentrated on one spot long enough to be effective at all. Apparently the beam weakened the cohesive power of the molecules of the metal itself, causing disintegration. The fact that this primitive people had such a weapon probably indicates a fortunate discovery made by some early experimenter, who, in all likelihood did not understand what he had created. Almost all great inventions, even those that come out of research laboratories, result from accidental discoveries. If the general technological development of the people making the discovery is great enough to permit them to understand and take advantage of these fortunate accidents, then real progress may result; otherwise the invention, which in itself may be very important, will probably amount to little. This explains why the Mongols, a primitive people, possessed so important a weapon, and made so little use of it.—Ed.

ward through the darkness but the tank was moving rapidly. Bouncing over the rough road, it was a difficult target.

THE sight of the escaping tank was more than the princess could stand. She ran forward among her followers and began to tell them what to do. When this was not immediately effective, she shoved a burly Mongol away from his post and began to operate his weapon herself.

Viktor vanished into the darkness.

Nish was licked. The princess had known what she was talking about when she said that the Jap was attacking in desperation. But even though the first attack had failed, there would be others. The Japs would sacrifice whole divisions in an effort to take this ancient citadel. They were licked this time, but they would come again, and unless America was warned in time, Jap divisions would spring to life in the heart of the United States.

Even after Viktor had slipped out of sight, he could still hear the throbbing of motors. The roaring sound changed abruptly into a shrill whine. He knew the meaning of that sound. He looked up. He could not see them in the sky overhead but he knew they were up there. Dive bombers!

The tank attack had been a ruse, a trick to draw the Mongol defenders out into the open. The real attack was coming from the sky!

Viktor's first impulse was to dive for shelter. He overruled it. Instead he ran back to where the Mongols were still chasing the fleeing tank. They must be warned. They were no friends of his but they would hold this end of the road against the Japs while he found his way along the dimensional path.

"Princess Neva!" he shouted.

"Watch out. Dive bombers!"

The Mongols had already heard the motors in the sky. Most of them probably did not know what it meant but Neva did. She had been to the United States and had ridden in planes. She was pointing upward, warning her followers to shoot the planes out of the sky. But the bombers were not visible. There was a moon overhead but it did not reveal the planes. They were diving downward. Vikor heard an abrupt change in the shrill whine of the motors. He knew what that meant. The bombs had been released and the lightened planes were shooting toward the sky. He threw himself flat on the ground.

The explosions that followed seemed to split the sky. The whole mountain shuddered. Debris fell in a ghastly rain around him. Half deafened by the explosions, he staggered to his feet.

At the top of the road, where Princess Neva and her Mongols had set up their weapons, was a series of huge overlapping holes, where the bombs had hit. He did not need to try to find out what had happened to the girl. He knew. Her followers might be able to repel tanks but dive bombers were another matter.

In the sky overhead, he could hear more engines. Another flight of bombers were coming. And down below along the road, he could hear a growing clamor. There were more tanks down there. When the bombers had finished their work, the tanks would charge again. This time there would be nothing left to stop them.

CHAPTER VIII

The Last Stand

VIKOR wasted precious minutes finding a Mongol who understood

enough English to be able to answer questions. Most of them had been killed in the first dive bombing attack. Those that remained alive were frightened out of their wits and were only interested in finding a place to hide from the horror that was riding down from the sky. He caught one seeking shelter. "Land of the Angry God?" he said.

The Mongol did not understand.

The second time he was luckier. He caught Kavor. "Show me the entrance to the realm of the Angry God and be quick about it," he demanded.

"No good!" Kavor said. "Can't get it. No key. Princess had the key and she is dead."

"I've got the key," Vikor said grimly. "You show me where to go. Incidentally you may save your own skin that way, if such a thing is of interest to you."

Kavor was very much interested in saving his own hide. He quickly led the American to an intricate pathway that slowly sloped downward. Apparently it had once been a natural opening, a chasm left by some earth tremor long in the past. Ancient workmen had smoothed the floor and cut steps where they were needed. Near the top, there was complete darkness but as they stumbled lower the walls began to give off a faint glow that enabled them to see.

Above them the thud of the bombs had ceased. The planes had finished their job and had gone back to the secret air base from which Nish had hastily summoned them. They had left the city a mass of wreckage.

"Nish come with men," Kavor warned.

"You don't need to tell me that," Vikor answered. He did not doubt but that the Japs had already occupied the city overhead and were even now



The flint spear head around her neck held Vikor's attention

searching for this passage.

"Nish know about this place," Kavor said. "Nish know way here. He come soon."

"Then it's up to you to move faster," Vikor said.

Thus prodded, Kavor led him at a dog-trot downward. "Almost there," the Mongol whispered. He was panting from the unaccustomed exertion of running.

The passage broadened into a wide chamber. At the far side were a set of massive gates made of stone—the doors that guarded the entrance to what the Mongols called the land of the Angry God.

"Got here in time!" Vikor panted. He started toward the gates—and found himself menaced from both sides. Three felt clad Mongols who had apparently pressed themselves against the wall so that he had not noticed them when he entered sprang toward him. Two of them were carrying swords. The third had a long lance.

"Halt! Stand where you are!" the command rang out.

"Holy cats!" Vikor gasped. "You almost scared the pants off of me, hopping up like this. Doc, where did you come from?"

Jean Watkins was holding the lance. Clad in the heavy felts of the Mongols, her face covered with dirt to complete the disguise, she looked enough like one of the Folsom men to have been one herself. The other two girls were similarly clad. Vikor, noticing only the clothes, had not recognized them until Jean spoke. And since they had seen only his clothes, they had not recognized him.

Jean hastily lowered the spear point. "Vikor!" she whispered. "Is it really you?"

"It's nobody else," the American answered. "Where did you come from?"

Where did you find those clothes?"

"We picked the lock of our cell," the startled girl answered. "We found the clothes. We've been hiding. When the bombing started, we tried to find shelter and accidentally reached this place. We didn't know where we were going. This passage seemed to lead somewhere until it ended at these doors."

"It *does* lead somewhere," the American agent said. "Where is the other one? We have to get out of here while we have a chance."

There were only three of the girls. Vikor looked around to discover the fourth, the one who had wanted to go home."

"She—" Even under its disguise of dirt, Jean Watkins' face showed the marks of pain. "She— isn't with us any more. We were hiding and—somebody blundered in and found us. We—tried to fight and she was—killed."

In short, jerky sentences she told the story. A girl had wanted to go home. She had not wanted to come here. She had been brought here against her will. Now she had gone—home.

"I'm sorry," Vikor said. That was all he could say. There weren't any words to express the way he felt. "I—what's that?"

THE sound of hurrying feet had come down the passage they had just quitted. The tunnel was an almost perfect tube for carrying sound. Then came the words of a command, spoken in a sing-songy voice that could only come from one source.

"Japs!" Vikor said. "Come on."

The great doors that barred the passage were made of huge stone blocks. Each must have weighed several tons. Vikor fitted the key into the mechanism.

"No go farther," a harsh voice said in his ear. "Stop here."

The American looked around. Kavor had pulled a pistol out from under his robe. It was Viktor's gun, the one that had been taken from him while he was unconscious. It was centered directly on his heart.

"No move!" the Mongol warned. "Nish pay big price for you."

"But—" Viktor started to speak and quickly shut up. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw what was happening.

The point of the lance struck the Mongol in the side of the throat. Grating, it went straight on through and came out the other side. Blood spouted. Kavor spun around. He dropped the pistol and tried to jerk the point of the lance out of his throat. A shout gurgled in his throat. The lance was wrenched free. Kavor staggered across the room. He fell heavily.

"Thanks!" said Viktor grimly, to Jean Watkins. "For an ethnologist, you are certainly quick on the trigger."

The girl's face had turned pale. "He and Nish were friends," she said resolutely. "I recognized him as soon as I saw him, and knew he had to be watched."

"How did you know—" Viktor checked himself. Questions would have to wait until later. The rattle of equipment and the pound of running feet were plainly audible in the corridor. Seconds counted now, less than seconds.

Would the key work? For all he knew there might be some secret in the way the key was turned that was all-important. He had had no chance to find out. He turned the key to the right, shoved his shoulder against the massive stone door.

Nothing happened.

He turned it in the other direction and shoved again.

The door did not move.

If once the Japs got to this chamber,

all hope was gone. A volley of shots would end everything. Cursing, Viktor shoved against the door. And nothing happened. From somewhere within the stone itself came a soft click. Nothing else.

"Hurry," Jean Watkins whispered. "They're almost here."

"I'm—*They're opening!*"

The massive doors were swinging aside. The click had indicated that some hidden mechanism had begun to operate. Slowly, ponderously, the huge portals opened inward. Viktor and the three girls went through. The doors began to close again. Bullets whanged against them as they slid back into position. The Japs had reached the entrance seconds late.

"That was close," the American said, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

THEY found themselves in a gloomy cavern where the air was heavy with the nauseous odor of burning sulphur. The path led downward. From the distance came dim flashes of light, reflections of open flames burning somewhere within this mountain. The air was hot.

"I know the way," one of the girls said. "They blind-folded us when they brought us through here, but my blind-fold had slipped a little. I think I can find my way back again. Come on."

"Good," said Viktor. "You three girls hurry through this place as fast as you can. As soon as you come out on the other side, hunt up a telephone and call Colonel Fiske, in G-2 in Washington, and tell him you are speaking for me. Tell him exactly what has happened and tell him to move at least a regiment of troops up to the cave in Colorado where you will come out. Tell him to send the troops through to me here as fast as they can move."

Their faces showed surprise and doubt. "Why are you staying here?"

Jean Watkins challenged.

"My job is here," Vikor answered.

"What job?"

"I don't have time to argue," Vikor said half angrily. "Move along, you girls. I'm depending on you to get that message to Colonel Fiske. I hope I don't need to remind you that the whole future of America may depend on you too."

"We know that," Jean Watkins said quickly. "What I don't know is why you are staying here."

"All right, I'll tell you," Vikor said. He pointed toward the heavy stone doors. "Those gates were hung there a long time ago. The men who built them designed them so they were strong enough to withstand any military force that could then be brought against them. But how long do you think they will stand up when a bushel of hand grenades are piled against them and exploded?"

There was a moment of odd, strained silence. In that silence the voice of Jean Watkins was low and tense. "You are going to stay here and try to hold back the Japs so we will have a chance to escape? Is that what you are saying?"

"The Japs must be stopped, *here!*" Vikor answered. "Those doors won't stop them long."

"So you are electing yourself for that job?"

"If you think I'm staying here to be a hero, you're a bunch of saps!" Vikor exploded. "I have a job to do and I'm going to do it. You have another job to do and I want you to do it. When the Jappos blow those doors down they will find a grim surprise waiting for them."

"What do you mean?" Jean Watkins insisted.

"I mean *that!*" Vikor said, pointing.

It was set back in an alcove hollowed

out of the solid rock. It was arranged so that the person operating it was protected on three sides. The tripod mounting had been discarded and the tube was set in a groove carved out of solid rock. It was big, the tube was at least ten feet long and the muzzle was about four inches in diameter—much larger than the slim tubes that, mounted on transits, looked like surveyors' sighting telescopes. The mounting was fixed so that it covered only one spot—the huge doors.

"The princess said one of those things was here," Vikor spoke. "I'm going to use it to stop the Japs. You girls move along, and good luck."

They were willing to leave, then, but they went hesitantly. The last he saw of them, Jean Watkins was looking back.

VIKOR crawled over the stone block that served as a mounting and began to examine the strange weapon. So far as he could tell, it seemed in good order. A trigger that seemed to release some kind of a shutter inside the barrel was the obvious method of firing it. But would it work?

He squinted through the notched sights, gently pressed the trigger and as quickly released it. A soft flutter came from the tube. Rock dust boiled from the stone doors.

"Ah!" Vikor said, in a satisfied tone of voice. He sat down and prepared to wait.

It was at least an hour before the first blast came from the other side of the doors. Vikor got ready. The huge stone gates trembled but did not fall.

The American relaxed. "Try a heavier charge next time, boys," he advised. There was no question but that the Japs would try a heavier charge. They would keep on trying until the doors went down.

A stealthy step sounded outside the alcove. Vikor got to his feet. Had the Japs found another way to enter? Were there other passages through the heart of this mountain? Were they sneaking past and attacking from the rear? He had given the pistol he had taken from Kavor to the girls. He was utterly defenseless against attack from the rear. A single grenade tossed into the alcove would blow him to bits.

The step sounded again. Vikor tensed himself to leap.

Jean Watkins' worried face looked around the corner at him. "Don't shoot," she whispered. "It's me. I've—I've come back."

"So I see!" Vikor grunted, in vast relief. "What happened? Couldn't you find your way?"

"I sent the other girls on. The path is plainly marked. They won't have any trouble finding their way. I came back because—well, it will take them six or seven hours to reach the other end of this cave. Then they will have to reach a telephone, and that may take a day. Then troops will have to be assembled—and—and—well," she said desperately, "it may be four or five days before the troops will reach you here." The words were coming in a rush. "You can't stay awake that long. You will have to sleep, to rest. No one can keep alert that long without sleep. That's why I came back—so one of us could sleep while the other watched!"

Her voice trailed off into silence. Vikor suddenly sat down. He looked at her. There was a grin on his face.

"Doc," he said. "Doc, you're all right. You're something a man could use for a girl. Doc— Oh, hell—"

"Did I do right, in coming back?" she whispered.

"So far as I'm concerned," he answered, "everything you do is all right."

There was another thunderous explo-

sion from beyond the doors. The heavy portals swayed.

"Get back in here with me, doc," Vikor called. "Here the little devils come."

With a crash, the doors fell inward. A platoon of Japanese infantrymen came streaming through the opening. Vikor pressed the trigger. A flutter sounded in the tube. An almost invisible beam of radiation lashed out. The cave was suddenly alive with the screaming of frantic men.

"Come and get it!" Vikor heard himself yelling at the top of his voice. "Come on you little devils and get your bellies full."

The flutter of the radiation streaming from the tube echoed through the cavern. The Japs had expected to find fugitives who were trying to run, fugitives that they could hunt down and use as practice targets for their bayonets. Instead they found a weapon invented by a people that had almost passed from the face of the earth, a weapon manned by two determined persons whose race would never vanish from the earth. They found death—sudden, inexplicable, fast-striking death.

Vikor suddenly realized he had no more targets. "That will hold them for a while," he said grimly. "That will give them something to think about. And we'll keep on giving them something to think about, until the boys from home get here, even if we have to hold this joint until next week. Won't we, Doc?"

"I'll say we will," Jean Watkins answered.

FORTUNATELY they did not have to wait a week. Both of them lost all track of time, knowing only that while one slept the other kept guard. The Japs came again and again. Each

time they met a fluttering blast of death. But it was not a week, it was not over two days, before a sudden, stuttering blast of automatic rifle fire streamed through the cavern—coming from behind. A company of khaki-clad men went streaming past, driving the Japanese ahead of them.

"Did you see that?" Vikor whispered to Jean Watkins.

"You the man we're supposed to rescue?" a panting lieutenant asked, stopping before the alcove. He didn't stop to explain that he was part of a regiment of parachute troops that had been in training in Texas and had been flown to Colorado when the order came from Washington. He was too surprised and astonished to think about that. "What kind of a gun is this you've got here? How did those Japs get here? What sort of a miracle is this, anyhow?"

"It's not a miracle," Vikor said. He explained what had happened. The officer's eyes widened in amazement.

"There was a miracle," Vikor continued. "A real miracle, and if it hadn't happened, both of us would probably be dead."

"What was that?" the girl asked.

"The breaking of Nish's bow," the agent answered. "That was a real miracle. If it hadn't broken, Nish would certainly have killed me, he would have won the princess and the key to this cavern. What are you laughing at now?"

Jean Watkins was laughing silently.

"That wasn't a miracle," she said.

"What was it then?" Vikor asked.

"You remember you were going to ask me how I knew Nish and Kavor were friends?" she answered. "Well, I knew it because when we were hiding in a place that must have been an armory—it was filled with bows and arrows and swords—Nish and Kavor came in. They were talking about the challenge to battle and they selected two bows. One of them they cut almost in two, so it would break as soon as it was drawn. We heard everything they said. Even though Nish was an expert archer he was not taking any chances on losing. They planned everything so you were to get the bow that would break—"

"Holy cats!" Vikor gasped. "And you—"

She nodded. "When they left the armory, we switched bows on them. Nish got the bow you were supposed to get. I didn't see the fight, but I'll bet he was surprised when his bow broke in his hands!"

"Was he surprised?" Vikor gulped. "He was down-right confounded! I never did see so startled a man. Doc—oh, hell, doc, you are really something a man could use for a girl—"

Oddly, she did not object to being called Doc. There were other things to which she had no objections either. The startled lieutenant, thinking they wanted privacy, discreetly looked the other way. He needn't have. They didn't mind his presence in the least.

ATOMIC ENERGY FROM URANIUM

THERE is enough atomic energy released from eight pounds of uranium by neutron bombardment to drive an ocean liner across the Atlantic, a task now requiring 6,300 tons of fuel oil. This is based on the figures obtained by Dr. Malcolm C. Henderson, American physicist, when he exposed only 13 grams of metallic ura-

nium to intense beams of slow neutrons generated at the great cyclotron of the University of California. A resistance thermo-couple was put inside the uranium to measure the temperature used. Dr. Henderson calculated from this experiment that each uranium atom that was split produced 175,000,000 electron volts of energy.



A lovely white girl came swinging through the trees, accompanied by two leopards

LEOPARD GIRL

By DON WILCOX

THE leopard, less than a hundred yards away, was advancing stealthily.

Lonnie Smith, perched high off the ground, watched through the leaves, scarcely daring to breathe.

The luckless leopard was walking straight into death. Lonnie glanced across the wall of foliage to the machan where his friend Bill Handershire was lying in wait, rifle ready.

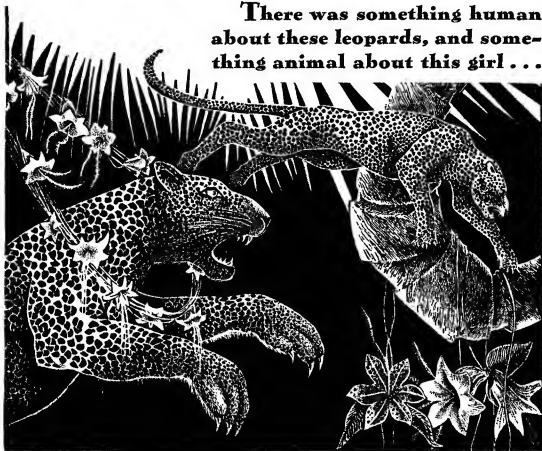
Bill was all set. He was leaning for-

ward in his machan, twenty feet above the ground, gripping the double-barreled Belgian-made Bury. He'd come all the way to India for this big moment. And like the true pal that he was, he'd brought Lonnie along to witness it.

Lonnie was glad enough to be a spectator, even though he was the greenhorn of the party. He had a keen appetite for drama.

Could a show like this be reproduced on Broadway, he wondered? What a

There was something human about these leopards, and something animal about this girl . . .



riot of colors and smells and noises! As an ace New York critic, Alonzo Smith thought of everything in terms of the stage.

Here was drama aplenty. The wild beast evidently sensed that it was trapped.

The native beaters screamed and pounded their noise makers. They had formed a wide circle and now they were coming in, driving their game into the narrow clearing by the riverbank.

Buffaloes, hyenas, and countless smaller animals chased through the grass ahead of the ferocious leopard.

Now the big cat came into view again—but only for a brief moment. Cunningly it took advantage of every bit of cover. Lonnie had heard that leopards were the most mysterious and clever of all the jungle beasts, if not the most ferocious. The beaters were holding back with extreme caution. Some had tossed away their yellow turbans, some had stripped down to their breech cloths, for fear their calico clothes would attract attention.

At sixty yards the leopard's head showed through the thick grasses. Its intelligent cat eyes seemed to pause in an upward glare straight at Lonnie. Could it be searching this bank of trees for the promised death? Or was it calculating for a leap of escape?

For a thrilling instant it came into full view in the sunlight, a flash of wild beauty. Its rosetted spots were almost blue-black upon its sleek, tawny coat.

What a shot! All the advantages were Bill's—yes, it was a horribly unfair fight, thought Lonnie—but hunting was hunting, and now was the time—

Blang-lannng!

II

THE leopard leaped downward. It leaped at the same split second that

the gun fired.

Lonnie wasn't sure whether the bullet struck its mark. For the moment the spotted beast was entirely out of sight. The beaters were scurrying back to play safe.

To Lonnie it had sounded like two shots instead of one, and he glanced far to the left where the Maharajah, also perched in a machan, was gripping a gun.

Suddenly the leopard sprang up out of the brush. It was racing faster than a galloping horse—racing silently and dangerously.

Bill shot again.

The bullet chipped a tree near the leopard's head. The beast gave an angry leap off in another direction. Two more shots followed as the beast zig-zagged toward the river bank. The last shot must have struck home, thought Lonnie. The leopard rolled toward the river and came to rest at the water's edge with a forepaw hanging limply above its face.

The beaters screamed warnings. Lonnie stuck to his tree to see what would happen next. Both Bill and the Maharajah climbed down. The *shikari*, who had been stationed a hundred yards from the river to handle his duties as chief hunter, came in to meet the other two.

There was a short conference. Bill was a bit too eager to bound down the bank and claim his prize. The Maharajah and the *shikari* advised caution. Yes, apparently the leopard was dead, but one cannot be too careful. A wounded beast is quick to deal death.

While the three advanced, Lonnie waited and watched. The beaters succeeded in chasing a few buffaloes along the river-bank, but the leopard showed no inclination to come to life and pounce on them.

With this assurance, Bill marched

down the bank alone like the proud young hunter and playboy he was. He tossed a few rocks at the prone animal. The lithe muscles within that tawny coat remained motionless.

Bill turned and called. "Hey, Lonnie! Did you see me do it, Lonnie?"

"I saw you, Bill," Lonnie yelled. "But I don't see any blood. Where'd you hit him?"

Bill edged closer to the fallen beast, while the shikari observed to the Maharajah that it wasn't a *him*, it was a *her*.

"She's a beauty, Mr. Handershire," said the Maharajah. "We'll have to line the cradle with soft leaves so we'll not injure her coat carrying her home."

Then Lonnie yelled down. "But Bill, she still breathing! I can see from here—"

At that instance the strange thing happened.

III

IT BEGAN with wild screams from the beaters nearest the river. But above the screams rang the shrill cry of a girl, calling, *Judy! Judeee! JUDEEEEE!*

She might have been flying. At first glimpse she was like a phantom, her beautiful head of flowing dark hair visible above the jungle grasses. She was being swept along as if by magic.

But at the instant her tanned shoulders and arms and legs broke into view it could be seen that *she was riding a leopard*.

Lonnie could barely hear the thudding feet of the swift animal. The cry of the girl made his blood run cold. She was racing straight toward Bill and the fallen leopard. She was like a circus rider, standing from the tip of her toes, clinging to the bits of vine that served as reins from the leopard's

throat. It was a daring feat, but she wasn't stunting.

"Judy! Come on! They'll kill you!"

Her cry was filled with terror.

In the flurry of that moment Lonnie was not too certain of his impressions. But he was sure she rode between Bill and the fallen animal, and he thought her hand brushed against the prone leopard's paw as she passed.

At any rate Bill's leopard suddenly rolled to its feet and sprang into action. Away went the three of them—two leopards and the nature girl—off into the depths of the jungle.

IV

THE Maharajah was the first to move. He turned his back upon Bill and began walking around in great agitation. Lonnie noted his scowl of deep worry and anger.

Lonnie's keen eyes hadn't missed much, for he had remained perched in his tree and had caught a close view of the nature girl as she had ridden off into the jungle.

Now he heard Bill's sulky grumble. "They can't do that to me. I'll get that leopard yet."

But Lonnie was concerned less with Bill's unsuccessful hunt than with the daring and the skill of this show that had just passed before his eyes. Certainly that had never happened on the stage, nor in the circus ring.

What a keen sensitive face that girl had possessed. Lonnie would know her if he ever saw her again—which, unfortunately, was not at all likely. For it was plain she was as much of this jungle as were the leopards themselves. One of those rarely seen children of nature, no doubt, who had grown up like any other beast—by the law of tooth and claw.

Lonnie couldn't help wondering how she would look in clothes. Terrible, probably. She'd have no more notions about what to do with an evening dress than would her leopards. She'd wail if anyone tried to fit her naked feet into shoes. Lonnie smiled to himself.

No creature of wild beauty like that, he thought, would ever take to clothes. She might have the keen intelligence it took to live with the most dangerous beasts. But she couldn't survive if she were thrown into civilization. Her very presence in this jungle proved—

Lonnie's musings were cut short.

More screams and clattering noises from the beaters turned his head. He was halfway down from his machan, thinking to join Bill on the ground and console him for his loss. But at once he changed his mind and clung to the branches of the tree until he could see where the excitement was coming from.

It came from two leopards and a girl—not quite the same girl, for now she was fully clothed in white slacks and blouse. And she wore them well!

The strange trio was racing back along the riverside, the beasts looking no less ferocious than before, the girl no less determined.

It was his gun that Bill was running for. But he was too slow. The girl and her leopards swung close to him and slackened their speed a trifle—just long enough for a lasso to swing out from her graceful arms.

The looped cord fell over Bill's head, tightened around his arms and chest. On the instant he was swept off his feet and onto one of the leopards.

Once more the two spotted beasts raced off into the dense jungle side by side, with the daring jungle girl and Bill, her prisoner, riding.

LONNIE sat on the ground watching them fly away. He saw a hint of

savage delight in the girl's face; he saw more anger than fear in the amazed countenance of Bill Handershire.

As he picked himself off the ground it occurred to him that sometime during the past few seconds he must have fallen from the tree. It was enough to make one fall. What would happen next?

There were low foreboding groans and whispers among the natives. This was an unnatural thing. It was not good for a dead leopard to come to life. It was very bad for the hunting parties of wealthy Americans to end unpleasantly.

The shikari tried to quiet their clamor.

"I don't think the leopard was ever shot," the Maharajah said. He stood back with great dignity while the chief hunter, surrounded by a huddle of beaters, searched for the bullet marks.

"You may look too," said Wamb, the English-speaking mahout who had brought Lonnie on one of the elephants. Wamb was a bright, friendly native boy, almost as cocksure in his dealing with people as with his pet elephant.

Lonnie accepted Wamb's offer and followed him into the cluster of beaters. The shikari pointed to the ground, making comments in his native tongue.

"He says he finds the marks of two bullets here," Wamb interpreted. "Both missed."

They moved on, all except Lonnie, who studied those first bullet marks to his own satisfaction. They had not come from the two barrels of Bill's gun, as the shikari had supposed, but from two different directions. The Maharajah himself, thought Lonnie, must have fired one of those shots.

Why? Was it not unheard of that a Maharajah should bring a guest out to kill a leopard and then try to beat him to the shot?

Or had the Maharajah meant to deceive Bill by shooting simultaneously with him? Thus Bill would think he had hit his mark on the first shot.

But could the Maharajah know that his guest would in reality miss? Two bullet holes for one sound of shooting would have caused some talk. The Maharajah must have blundered, thought Lonnie.

The amazed party followed the leopard's tracks all the way to the water's edge and failed to find a drop of blood. Again they were given to low mutterings of awe and superstition.

"They are saying, 'How could a leopard play dead?'" Wamb said to Lonnie. "They are smelling trouble. They are asking, 'How could a white hunter be carried away by leopards and a white girl?'—and they are asking who will be carried away next. They are afraid to go searching for your unfortunate friend."

"Bill has a pistol," Lonnie replied. "He'll come back."

"Aren't you afraid, Mr. Smith?"

Lonnie smiled. "You've been taking good care of me, Wamb. And you seem to know your way around as well as the Maharajah himself. I won't be afraid until you tell me it's time to be."

The beaters collected their goods and made ready to be off, though there was some disagreement as to which way they would go. The Maharajah himself was forced to add the weight of his authority to the order of the shikari.

"Of course we'll follow the leopards. Mr. Handershire must be recovered. Keep your guns ready. If the girl's pets get in our way we must shoot."

Wamb's elephant.

"Could you tell me which way to go?" Wamb answered evasively.

"Of course not, but you're an expert at following trails."

"We'll wait," Wamb said, "until the Maharajah leads the way. But we won't find your friend. He will find us."

It happened as the young mahout predicted. After a half hour of getting the hunting party reorganized for travel, and another half hour wasted in the pretense of trying to locate the leopards' trail, the Maharajah gave a surprised shout.

"Ah! Mr. Handershire returns!"

Bill came stalking through the high grasses looking very dusty and weary.

"They can't do this to me," he growled, as soon as he had freshened his lips with water. "I'll get that leopard yet. I'll get both of them."

"You are entitled to them," said the dignified Maharajah. "It is unfortunate that we must now return without them. I have affairs of business awaiting."

There was nothing unfortunate about it, as far as the native beaters were concerned. They grinned with relief to know the hunt was recessed.

"Tell us what happened, Bill," Lonnie called down from his elephant seat.

"I was kidnapped," Bill muttered savagely. "I'll give you the lowdown later, Lonnie."

"Okay—but who was the girl?"

"How do I know? All I can say is, she keeps dangerous company."

"Do I—or do I not—see a print of red lipstick on your face?"

"You do not," Bill snorted, but nevertheless he hastily scrubbed his face with his handkerchief. "Let's get going."

VI

"LET'S go ahead," Lonnie suggested to Wamb as the two of them settled in their places on the back of

VII

WAMB, the young mahout, was a rare friend. When he wasn't talk-

ing to his elephant he was slipping remarks to Lonnie. And how much he knew was surprising.

Lonnie's tales of the wonders of America had won him over, and in turn he divulged a variety of information on this block of India jungle.

He talked about the difference between hunting for tigers and hunting for leopards. He pointed out that the hunt had been organized as a tiger hunt—a fact which Lonnie could affirm—and that any leopard could have leaped or climbed into the machans where the hunters had nested.

"You're right, it was tigers we had come to hunt in the first place," Lonnie admitted.

"But only the leopards came to us," the young mahout smiled mysteriously. "Interesting, isn't it?"

"Do you think the beaters could have had anything to do with it?" Lonnie suggested. "On their roundup they might have let the promised tigers slip through while closing in on the leopard. But surely they wouldn't make such a mistake without a reason."

"There was no mistake," Wamb said. "They always obey the Maharajah."

Lonnie was destined to recall those words. In chance ponderings he would speculate over these disturbing hints that the Maharajah had a preference for killing leopards.

The elephant tossed Lonnie back and forth and he bent low to avoid being brushed off by overhead branches.

"Do you know who that girl was?" he asked presently.

Wamb cast about before answering. The beaters, accompanying their pack animals, were chattering noisily. The loquacious shikari was trying to talk Bill Handershire out of his moody silence. The Maharajah and his attendants were well ahead. Nevertheless, Wamb answered in guarded tones, as if

exposing the world's deepest secrets.

"I know who the girl was. But my words are only for your ears."

"Very well, I won't tell anyone but Bill."

"Tell no one," said Wamb.

"But Bill and I talk over everything—"

"Your friend Mr. Handershire does not have your ears for understanding. He knows his guns. He knows his American games. But he does not have your ears and eyes for the mysteries of India."

"All right, Wamb. I'll keep mum, if you say so."

"Your judgment is good," Wamb said, his dark eyes gleaming with fires of mystery. "The girl—"

"Yes?"

"She is a subject of Koko-Jah. She is a favorite work of his magic."

"Who is Koko-Jah?"

"White men call him a fakir and a tramp. But he is the Indian mystery man of all this jungle region owned by the wealthy Englishman, Mr. Sylvester Kemp, and governed by our Maharajah. If you stay long enough, I will show you this strange man Koko-Jah and with him all his wonderful snakes."

"Snakes?"

"They are the tools of Koko-Jah's magic."

Lonnie listened to this talk half-skeptically, though he was impressed by the Hindu boy's evident sincerity.

"I had never supposed that a girl could conquer and ride leopards," Lonnie said. "Were this fakir's snakes supposed to have charmed her or something?"

"Her strangeness is not a charm. It is a curse. That much I know."

Wamb's confidences lowered to a whisper.

"The curse was *bought* by the wealthy Englishman, Mr. Sylvester

Kemp," he continued. "Mr. Kemp *purchased* it to be placed upon his granddaughters. The girl you saw is one of them."

"Where are the others?"

"You would not believe me if I told you," said Wamb. "If there are others who know the secret they never talk of it. No one knows that I know. So I am breaking no confidences by speaking of it to you. What I know I have found out for myself."

"Can you tell me, then?" Lonnie asked.

"If you will stay until the month's end I will *show* you," said Wamb.

VIII

BY evening the hunting party came to a halt in the park between the mansion of Sylvester Kemp and the palace of the Maharajah. There were a few lodges tucked in along the mile-wide strip of garden that divided the homes of these two important men. One of these lodges had been assigned to Lonnie and Bill as their headquarters.

As Lonnie had remarked at the time, he and Bill were two thin dabs of cheese between a couple of slices of India's bread. Important slices. "And well-bred," Bill had added.

The very proximity of these two rich homes was enough to suggest that there might be rivalry and jealousy between the Maharajah and the wealthy English owner of this block of jungle; though Lonnie thought little of this at the time. Bill had managed to buy hospitality here for his hunting, by calling upon friends of friends; and these headquarters were ideal for a short stay.

Lonnie and Bill hurried out of their hunting togs.

They would dine with the Maharajah tonight.

The venerable Sylvester Kemp would

be there too. It would be an Occasion in capital letters.

"You'd better be ready to talk fast, Bill," Lonnie warned. "They're all going to look to you for some tall explanations. So far you haven't opened your head about what happened today."

"Hell, what can I say? She just naturally picked me up and taxied me away on her leopards."

"And then what?"

"She started in asking me questions about America. All she wanted was some chummy chatter."

"And you—"

"I wanted to slap her ears down. I wanted to run away from the glare of those damned beasts—especially Judy, the one I almost shot. And I wanted revenge."

"For what?"

"For the way she took advantage of me, knocking out my hunt."

"So you tried to take advantage of her?"

"Maybe I did." Bill raised his eyebrows meaningfully. "All right. I admit it. I had an overpowering desire to make love to her. But what the hell?"

"Didn't you do so well?"

"Did you ever try to make love to a girl with a couple of pet leopards lying within ten feet of you, widening their eyes and opening their jaws every time you tried to kiss her?"

Lonnie laughed. "I never did, pal."

"You should have been in my place."

"Wish I had, at that. Your jungle girl friend was as easy on the eyes as any Broadway dazzler. What was her name?"

"Violet."

"Oh! A shy little violet."

"And as sophisticated as the devil," Bill growled. "That's why I lost the battle. She asked all the questions, and all I found out was her name. But I'll bet she and her leopard pets have got

an address and a telephone number."

THEY finished dressing and hiked over the path toward the Maharajah's.

"You'd better decide just how much or how little you'll tell at dinner," Lonnie warned. "The Maharajah was considerably agitated over the turn of events. I'm convinced he wanted you to get that leopard."

"I'll get some big game yet."

"By now the news of your little fiasco has spread all over this corner of India. Anyway, someone should be able to tell us who this girl is. She's no simple denizen of the jungle, the kind that movie heroes teach how to say 'yes' and 'no' and 'kiss'."

"I didn't teach her anything. She's been places, I tell you. She wanted to know who's playing at the big London theaters. And what's doing at Rockefeller center."

"By George! She *has* been around. Go on, tell me more."

"She made me promise never to shoot at her leopards again," said Bill. "And I promised. Then she up and kissed me. And before I could grab her, she leaped to Matilda's back, and she and Matilda and Judy chased away. So I hoofed it back to the hunt."

They were nearing the third entrance among the labyrinth of white crenelated walls that enclosed the Maharajah's palace.

"What'll I do, Lonnie, if the Maharajah suggests another leopard hunt?"

"Put him off. Remind him it was tigers you wanted in the first place."

"But if he insists?"

"Which he will, if I know anything about it." Lonnie's lips tightened and his eyes drew into narrow lines. "Bill, I don't know what we're getting into, but I've kept one ear to the ground and what I've heard sounds like trouble.

We'd better get ready to take sides—or else scram out of it before we get a foot caught. Which'll it be?"

"I came here for adventure," said Bill.

They paused before the palace doorway and finished their conference in whispers.

"Which side, then, Bill? You know the Maharajah. You know the girl. The 'Rajah is our host. He's organized your hunt. He's protecting you. On the other hand, the girl has done nothing but make you trouble and embarrassment."

"I came for adventure," Bill said. "I'll fight for the girl. I figure she's a decent sort. But the 'Rajah—I'm not too sure about him."

IX

FROM the moment of the Maharajah's formal reception, Lonnie was on needles and pins about Bill. Bill was on the spot. It had been easy enough for him to ride back from the hunt on an elephant and remain in a moody silence.

But here in the sumptuous mirrored halls, under the penetrating gaze of all the 'Rajah's aristocratic guests, Bill was in for some sharp probing.

Cunningly, the 'Rajah started off with questions about America, and Bill Handershire grew voluble. America was far enough away that he could say anything he wanted to.

Lonnie was interrupted by the whisper of a servant.

"I have borrowed a picture, Mr. Smith." It was Wamb. "I place it in your hand. Give it back later."

Lonnie never took his eyes off his plate. He took the card from Wamb without distracting the attention of the table, and slipped it in his pocket.

The conversation went on briskly. By

this time Bill was cordially inviting the 'Rajah and all his friends to come to America at his expense, and be his personal guests.

"And do you own one of these great American skyscrapers?" the 'Rajah asked innocently.

"Not exactly a skyscraper. You see, I'm in the theater business. I own a big theater in New York, and have a few others scattered around through the states."

And with this magnificent start, Bill multiplied upon his possessions and responsibilities.

All of which, as Lonnie well knew, was an exercise of Bill's imagination. It was Bill's uncle, Ivan Brunt, who was the theater owner. It was Ivan Brunt's wealth that made Bill the careless playboy who could take hunting trips to India or sign checks in Rio or Vladivostok.

Later, the conversation turned to sports and again Bill was able to account for a goodly share of American glory. These claims were more nearly in accord with fact, for Bill Handershire had been a football and track star.

"I can understand readily, Mr. Handershire, that you are a man who makes a success of everything you undertake," said the Maharajah.

"You've got my number, all right. That's me. Whatever I start, I see it through."

The Maharajah smiled faintly, and his dark eyes passed slowly around the table.

"I can see that my guests are impressed by your words. They will be pleased to know how soon you will finish your hunt."

"I came to hunt tigers," said Bill bluntly.

The Maharajah nodded. "We wish you well in that, too. But a tiger hunt would hardly make up for today's loss.

The animal you thought you shot was very clever. It left you with a challenge. And there was a second leopard, as well, which slipped through your fingers. My guests are wondering how soon you will kill them?"

Bill grew red with anger and embarrassment. He leaned toward Lonnie, who whispered, "Make them tell you who the girl was."

The red disappeared from Bill's cheeks, and the old football fighting face came back. All he needed, thought Lonnie, was a bit of coaching. Bill banged his fist on the table.

"I'll do some more hunting, don't worry. But first you tell me one. Who was that girl that tried to kidnap me? What's she doing out there in the jungle?"

The Maharajah raised his eyebrow in a look of grand surprise.

"Girl?" he said. "Why Mr. Handershire, I didn't see any girl."

X

BILL and Lonnie were both fighting mad. Lonnie had to keep whispering. "Tact. Tact."

Bill stuck to his guns. He reviewed the whole incident, and went over the details carefully. But the Maharajah only shook his head.

"It was only the heat, Mr. Handershire. Many American hunters have delusions under this heat. I saw no girl. Neither did the shikari."

"But Lonnie saw her, just as I did."

"Yes, we all saw her," Lonnie's throat was tight with suppressed rage. It was maddening to see how the Maharajah and his guests could maintain their suave manners. "What's more, your hunters and beaters saw her. I heard them talking."

"I'll see," said the 'Rajah politely, "but I'm sure you're mistaken. They

can only see what I see. They are not given to fanciful visions."

The Rajah sent for some beaters. Meanwhile, Lonnie saw that Wamb, moving slowly across a farther hallway, was making an effort to catch his eye. The only signal that came from Wamb was a slight shake of the head. But it was enough.

Lonnie whispered to Bill, "Let it drop. We *were* seeing things."

Bill scowled. He wasn't used to walking off the field in the middle of the game, but Lonnie's nudge conveyed the idea. This game must be postponed on account of darkness.

A moment later the beaters entered and said exactly what the Rajah wished them to say—that they had seen no girl. Yes, they remembered some strange behavior on the part of Mr. Handershire, walking off into the jungle alone after the two leopards got away from him, but he had returned, albeit in a very despondent mood, an hour or so later.

"There, you see," said the Maharajah. "The jungle heat plays tricks on the best of us."

"Strange tricks is the word for it," said Bill. "Guess I was just nuts. Well, there'll be another hunt."

"That is better, Mr. Handershire," the Maharajah smiled. "May the leopards fall at your feet very soon. And now, let us go on with the tenth course of our dinner."

XI

IT WAS the last day of the month.

Wamb was a boy of his word. He had not forgotten his promise to lead Lonnie to a scene of mysteries on this date.

The boy of India set a good pace, but Lonnie was becoming seasoned to jungle life, and he took the rugged

trail in his stride.

He felt somewhat guilty over leaving Bill out of his confidence. Wamb inquired about this.

"I've refrained from mentioning these matters," said Lonnie. "Bill has had enough to think about since the Maharajah's dinner. He has postponed one hunt after another. But today, while the Maharajah was too busy to go with him, he went after his long-promised tigers. I hope he won't be forced to shoot leopards, instead."

"He won't," said Wamb confidently. "At least not the leopards that matter. We'll find them at the end of this trail. On this one day of the year they must visit Koko-Jah."

"And that is the curse that someone has wished on the leopard girl?" Lonnie tried not to reveal his skepticism.

"You shall see," said Wamb.

The trail ascended. It was not a well-traveled path, though it may have been at one time. In places it had been cut deeply in the mountainside, though centuries of weathering had obliterated the sharp edges.

After an hour they crossed a divide and began a jogging descent toward a thickly forested valley.

"We could have gone around this toe of mountain," said the brown-skinned boy. "But going over is less dangerous. Down there in the thick forests are too many hungry animals. The leopards will come by that route."

"Is there a name for this valley?"

"I suppose there used to be. But I've never heard it. To me this is the mountain of Koko-Jah. We'll find the old fakir's cave before we get down to the forest."

"How did you ever find your way over here in the first place?"

"By following him. The younger boys always make a sport of following snake charmers. But none of my

chums ever followed me all the way. That's why my secrets are my own."

The green lumps that filled the valley swelled into mounds of trees. The mountainside passed swiftly beneath Lonnie's feet and began to rear above him. The mouth of Koko-Jah's cave came into sight.

"We are early," Wamb said, stopping suddenly. "There he is."

The boy pointed down the crooked trail to what appeared to be a six-foot stump of bamboo tree. That was Koko-Jah, he said.

"You mean he dresses in bamboo?"

"Some of the time. It's an easy disguise to wear along the well-traveled trails when he wants to travel without being noticed. He can stop and pull his arms in and look like a tree. He can carry all his provisions and magic equipment. But sometimes the snakes crawl out and attract attention."

"Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. Where did I—oh, yes. Bill and I had an argument several days ago. We had each seen a short, stumpy tree somewhere—just like that one—sawed off—grown over—about as tall as a man. There were snakes poking their heads out through the holes near the top. Was that—"

"That was Koko-Jah," Wamb said. "He came past several days ago."

"Then that explains it. Bill insisted he had seen it out in front of the Maharajah's. But I knew I had seen it near Sylvester Kemp's."

"Now you see it arriving at home," said Wamb. "Inside that bamboo shell is Koko himself, with some of his snakes wrapped around his neck. He'll be ready for the ceremony at noon."

XII

THEY hung back until the little old Hindu fakir had cast off his hollow

bamboo shell, gathered up his snakes, and disappeared into the cave.

Then Lonnie followed Wamb down the path to a convenient hiding place above the ledge that formed the mouth of the cavern. There Lonnie waited. Wamb went ahead to keep watch until everything was favorable for Lonnie to come.

In a few moments Wamb returned, and there was a flush of excitement in his intense brown face. He had sighted the approaching leopards on their way up the forest trail. In another half hour they would be here.

Meanwhile he would go find some scented plants for Lonnie and him to rub on their hands. Leopards were tempermental about smells, he said, and this eavesdropping adventure would be safer if the human smells were counteracted as much as possible.

Lonnie took from his pocket the little picture card which Wamb had once handed to him. Many times since the Maharajah's dinner he had studied that card. It was a photograph of three pretty little English girls. On the back was a brief inscription, obviously a record of their ages.

"Your granddaughters, Sylvester—6—8—10."

It was easy to guess that the three were sisters, ages six, eight, and ten. According to the date on the picture the six-year-old would have become a nineteen-year-old.

Lonnie regretted that no names had been written. He knew, of course, from Wamb's mysterious talk, that the jungle girl—Bill's "Violet"—was one of these three. But in spite of his vivid mental picture of her, he couldn't decide whether she was the nineteen-year-old, the twenty-one, or the twenty-three.

Soon after Wamb returned and the two of them had anointed themselves

with plant smells, they slipped into the open cave and crawled on hands and knees along a black shelf of stone that hung like a miniature balcony along the cavern ceiling.

They followed through almost complete darkness until it seemed that the C-shaped curve would return to its starting point. Then a light came into view.

It was a single tongue of yellow flame rising out of a small altar which stood half as tall as Koko-Jah. The altar was made of mud bricks stacked in a loose arrangement. Snakes were crawling lazily in and out of the black apertures between the bricks.

Three or four small cobras were among the snake collection, and at Lonnie's first sight of this bizarre scene he saw that the little old Hindu was bringing a few more hollow jars out of a corner, placing them around this altar for the cobras to play in.

Now that he was out of his walking bamboo tree, the little old fakir had a fairly close resemblance to things human. His brown hands were much too large and bony, and the darkness of his face could not hide its wrinkled ugliness. He wore a dirty yellow turban, coarse clothing, and, for added adornment, a few live snakes around his neck.

But for all his repulsiveness he was a magnetic creature, and his every movement was as dramatic as an actor's gesture. He had a way of swinging his right arm up, flopping his limp right hand and his head in a backward spasm, as if someone had struck him unexpectedly under the right shoulder blade.

Every few minutes he repeated the gesture, until Lonnie began to wonder if it was a tic.

At last there were the sounds of guests arriving, announced by the low

purr of an approaching leopard.

Instantly Koko-Jah dropped to a sitting position on the floor, folded his arms and legs, and became rigid. He muttered an order to his serpents. Obediently they crawled into the black holes of the mud-brick altar, and the tongue of yellow blaze rose until it was as tall as a man.

XIII

"I'LL LEAVE you as soon as they come in, Mr. Smith," Wamb whispered. "You must see for yourself what happens. I have already seen, for many years."

Wamb crept away silently. His wanting to leave was a warning to Lonnie to steel himself for something unpleasant.

The first that Lonnie saw of the approaching party was a pair of leopard eyes glaring through the darkness. Into the light of the yellow flame the tawny spotted beast moved gracefully, silently. It took a place across from where Koko-Jah was sitting, as if this were a familiar ceremony which it expected to go through with dispatch.

The second leopard took a place beside it, and there the two of them sat, with handsome dignity. Lonnie gave a little breath of relief. From where they had stationed themselves they were not likely to see him. They sat almost directly in front of him, facing the fire. The fire was to his right, the little old fakir still farther to the right, with his back against the end wall of the cave.

From all appearances the rigid little old Hindu might not have known that the savage beasts had entered.

Lonnie scrutinized them critically and decided that the slightly smaller one on the farther side was the "Judy" that Bill had almost killed. The nearer

one, then, was Matilda.

Now the third member of the party—the jungle girl herself—came in to take her place before the altar. She stationed herself almost directly beneath Lonnie's hiding place.

The jungle girl's dark eyes were cast downward. She was the picture of sorrow and of resignation. Lonnie was startled to read her expression, remembering the daring and alert face she had worn when she had upset the hunt.

Koko-Jah's thick brown eyelids lifted slowly. He was expressionless as he looked at the girl and her two pets. He muttered a few indistinguishable words and spat into the yellow flame. That was all. His eyelids fell. He sat as rigid as a stone and waited.

A blue flame crawled snake-like out of the tongue of yellow fire. It bent outward toward the girl. Then it drew back into the top of the altar.

Once it was gone Lonnie couldn't be sure whether it had been a flame or a snake.

It came again, moving its eyeless head back and forth. This time Lonnie was almost certain it was a snake, though very different from any he had seen before. But it drew back out of sight.

Once more it came. This time it struck out vigorously, a luminous blue ribbon fluttering in the wind. It could hardly be a snake, for obviously it was made of blue fire.

Yet it could not be fire, for it didn't burn. At least, the girl didn't flinch from it.

She extended both her hands and the blue snake of flame wrapped itself around her fingers, her hands, her wrists.

THE blue snake was an endless ribbon. The fire kept rolling it out. It kept coming, winding, spiralling,

whirling like a streamer caught in a spinning fan. It spun around her shoulders, her breasts, her throat. Faster and faster it spun and gathered upon her lithe body until it hung like ruffled clothing and the weight of it began to bend her down.

Then Lonnie saw that her hands, which had been the first to receive the snaky luminous stream, were beginning to lose it.

But they were no longer hands. *They were leopard's claws.*

She bent downward until those claws touched to the cave floor. By this time her beautiful face was enshrouded. Lonnie's blood froze. Wouldn't she smother? How could she breathe?

Now he saw that other parts of her body were emerging from the snaky fire. Her body—no, it was no longer the same body. *It was the body of a leopard.**

Lonnie gasped for breath. He had a feeling that he was about to faint. He almost wished he could faint, or fade into the wall, or hide his eyes from these terrifying sights.

But the end was not yet.

Even as the transformed head began to emerge from the swirling bands of fiery ribbon—a beautifully shaped leopard's head with cool penetrating cat-like eyes—even as this one miracle of

* Certain savage tribes of Africa claim to be able to transform themselves into animals, notably into panthers. The tiger-men (erroneously named) have received a great deal of publicity, and science has investigated their rites, and noted several cases of killings supposed to have been the work of these humans in animal form. In one instance, such a panther, wounded in escaping, vanished, although trapped, and a member of the tribe was later found who had a suspiciously bullet-like wound in his shoulder although he claimed to have fallen on a sharp stick. Actually, however, no concrete evidence has been uncovered that the strange capabilities of the witch doctors of these tribes, in turning themselves into animals, really exist. This in spite of a firm, unshaken belief in its truth by literally millions of African natives.—Ed.

horror was still in the process of completion, another transformation was going on.

For several minutes one of the blue fire-streams had been at work upon the farther leopard, spinning around a fore-paw like a fireworks whirligig. But Lonnie had been too much concerned with the fate of the girl to pay any attention to a leopard.

Now, however, he saw that what had happened to this girl called Violet was only half of the story. The other half was what was happening to the leopard called Judy.

As the windings of fire proceeded around the body of the smaller beast, its hind paws emerged as human feet. It straightened upward gradually. It rose into a graceful form, swathed almost completely with the ruffled clothing of snaky flames.

Strangely, the leopard which stood at the center of the trio was left untouched and unchanged.

At last the other two members of the trio were completely transformed. Where the first jungle girl had stood there was now a *new* leopard. Where the farther leopard had stood there was now a girl—yes, a *new jungle girl*!

The new girl turned, drawing her scanty clothing close about her, and looked to the two leopards.

"Come, Matilda. Come, Violet," she said quietly. Then, wasting only a hint of a glance upon the frozen little old Hindu, she turned and walked out of the cave followed by the two leopards.

The last of the blue flames were swallowed up in the diminishing yellow tongue of fire. The live snakes crawled out of the black blotches among the mud bricks. The Hindu mystery man rose up and gave a spasmodic upward fling to his right arm, muttering something to himself. Then he gathered up his snakes and left.

XIV

WHEN Lonnie Smith was admitted to the mansion of the venerable old Englishman, Sylvester Kemp, he knew he was in the presence of one of India's richest men.

Sylvester Kemp had once had dreams and visions for this patch of jungle. He had fought for what he wanted—not so much for India, as for a private little kingdom all his own.

The fight had left its marks on him. Lonnie knew a great deal about the man before the momentous evening of this visit. Ever since the night of the Maharajah's dinner he had kept both ears to the ground.

He found himself facing a thin, drooping, silver-haired old gentleman whose black beetling eyebrows were as untamed as the jungle that this man had so vainly tried to conquer.

"Have this seat, Mr. Smith," the old man whined. "You look too fresh for the strenuous day you've had."

"Thank you," said Lonnie. "Life is a bit strenuous."

To himself Lonnie added, "How on earth did he know where I've been today. If he's onto this visit I made to Koko-Jah's cave, then he has the jump on me."

But Sylvester Kemp's next remark banished Lonnie's apprehensions.

"Strenuous, indeed, is this business of hunting. But I understand that you bagged two fine tigers. Or was it your friend who pulled the trigger on them? No matter, all white men who brave the jungles deserve a share of the credit, whether they set off the fatal bullet or stand back and leave that honor to a friend. Both tigers were splendid specimens, I hear."

"I'm sorry," said Lonnie. The truth was that in his overwhelming excitement over the terrible thing he had

seen in the cave of Koko-Jah he'd forgot all about Bill's hunt. "I can't claim any of the honors. I didn't go with Mr. Handershire this time."

"Didn't go? Too bad, too bad. I'm afraid you aren't getting any excitement out of your stay here in India. You've been here several weeks, haven't you?"

The old man was very feeble. Lonnie had expected that. But he was surprised at this show of congeniality. He knew the man's reputation too well, however, to set it aside in his mind. Sylvester Kemp was mean, sick, stubborn, and hateful. His own doctor had told Lonnie that Kemp was a paranoid who could turn brutally upon his friends or his children.

It was a known fact that serious trouble had occurred between him and his grandchildren, and no one had any doubt as to who was to blame.

"I am finding a great deal of excitement, Mr. Kemp," said Lonnie. "The people—the jungles—the mysteries. India is even more exciting than Broadway, New York, and that's saying a lot."

"Don't mention Broadway to me," the old man barked.

LONNIE saw that he was off to a bad start. He spent the next hour trying to make a friendly and sociable visit pave the way for further confidences. But he didn't realize that he was running into a snag when he mentioned that the Maharajah had given a wonderful dinner some time previous and it was unfortunate that Mr. Kemp couldn't have attended.

"I wasn't invited," said Sylvester Kemp hotly.

"That's strange," said Lonnie. "I remember distinctly that the Maharajah expressed his regrets that you were unable to come."

"That isn't the first time in forty years that he has tried to blanket me with white lies," Kemp growled. "But he knows I hold the whip hand. I stand solid with the government, and if he angers me too much I'll show him. I'll leave the administration of my estate in the hands of some *other* unscrupulous robber."

Lonnie tried to take the statement as a joke, but a look of inquiry must have lingered on his face, for the old man went on with his savage barking.

"Yes, I'll throw you another bone to tease your curiosity along. You American tourists needn't worry. I don't know what you come over here for, but I'm watching my wealth. And when I get through with it, the Maharajah will take over that whole block of virgin jungle where you and your friend have been hunting."

"It's a shame you haven't any descendants. Not that the Maharajah isn't worthy, so far as I know," said Lonnie, treading cautiously. "But if you only had some children or grandchildren to inherit—"

"I do have grandchildren," Sylvester Kemp raised his cane and smacked it down on the arm of the chair—a chair that bore several hundred scars. "But if they can't appreciate what I do for them, they can go to hell and starve."

"You don't mean that."

"I do mean it. Have you seen any grandchildren of mine around the premises? Have you seen them sitting around idolizing me, pouring my tea or fixing my tie or helping me keep the accounts? No, you haven't. You'll never see a grandchild of mine around here. Why? Because they're worthless. They don't have what it takes to live in the jungle."

"Are you sure?" Lonnie blurted hotly.

"What's that?"

"I say, are you sure they couldn't live in the jungle?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I mean—" Lonnie was aware that the old man's black eyes were drilling him like gimlets. "I mean, if they don't live around here, where do they live?"

"They're away," said Sylvester Kemp. "They're in the show business. Look over the bills of London or your own Broadway. They'll be there. Only you wouldn't know their names. And I wouldn't tell you. But I can put your curiosity at rest. They're there from the start of any season till—"

The old man broke off, with his eyes fixed on a calendar. His lips spoke the date silently, and he sat muttering to himself, pale and nervous.

"I think I'd better go," said Lonnie.

Lonnie moved toward the outer hall. The old man was so high-strung and nervous, all at once, that Lonnie hesitated to probe any farther. He'd got what he'd come for—almost. He knew that Kemp knew this was the date for the ceremony in Koko-Jah's cave. But every answer had opened a new mystery. He decided to try one further thrust.

"I'll go," he repeated. "Handershire will be back from his hunt, and I'm anxious to see whether he got those leopards."

"Leopards!" The old man jumped from his chair. "Nobody dares shoot any leopards in my jungle. The Maharajah would never allow that. Never!"

"That's what you think," Lonnie said it under his breath. If he had said it aloud there might have been a murder that night.

XV

BILL HANDERSHIRE was in the mood to leave India as soon as the

dead tigers were safely back in camp. He accompanied the truck on to the nearest large city, to make sure the beasts were unloaded without any injuries to their handsome coats. Then, as soon as he had completed satisfactory plans for the drying and shipping of the skins, he made air reservations for himself and Lonnie. Their plane hops would begin three days hence.

For Bill the three days were filled with preparations for taking leave, including the purchase and shipment of numerous souvenirs, and the paying of respects to a few millionaire friends of his uncle, Ivan Brunt.

Or if not friends, then acquaintances. Even in India the former associates of Ivan Brunt still thought of him by his nickname—Ivan the Terrible.

Meanwhile, Lonnie had a long and highly confidential talk with the young mahout, Wamb. It was Wamb's ambition to come to America eventually; and so bright and honorable a lad he was that Lonnie made him the promise of a passage when the right time should come.

"In the meantime," said Lonnie, "I'll depend upon you to keep me informed about Koko-Jah's doings. As I said before, I wish I could stay and see that trouble cleared up. Bill would feel the same way if he knew what we know."

"Are you going to question the Maharajah any further?" Wamb asked.

"Tomorrow night after the dinner hour. It was the only time I could get an appointment. I'll have to make it short. Bill and I are supposed to start for the city tomorrow at midnight, to be on hand for our plane in the morning—if we go."

All the rest of that day, and the next, Lonnie kept saying things to himself.

Finally he devised a note that he thought of leaving for Bill:

I can't go, Bill. I'll come later. Just

now I've a share in the troubles of the jungle. I'm caught inside the deepest, most uncanny Indian mystery. That's enough to hold me here.

The fact is, I've learned about three English girls that are being punished and tortured for nothing. The whims of a cruel grandfather have made them the victims of an unspeakably grotesque magic trick. Each of them has only one year's freedom out of every three years. You wouldn't understand. But I'll tell you all about it when I get back.

By the way, I've a hunch you really fell for that jungle girl that kidnapped you. Am I right or wrong? If you really fell—

Lonnie found that he couldn't finish. Bill Handershire had never fallen kersmash for anyone. But some of his ravings since that jungle kidnapping proved that a girl named Violet was still on his mind—or had been, until the thrill of a tiger hunt took over.

But what were the chances, Lonnie kept asking himself, that Bill would get halfway to America and turn around and come back?

Wouldn't the mention of the name Violet, plus a few hints about Koko-Jah's powerful secrets, cause Bill to cancel his plane? It would be like a coach's between-halves pep talk. "Get back in there and fight."

Especially would this be true if Lonnie were sure that a certain avaricious Maharajah were looking forward to the death of some leopards, to facilitate his taking possession of some riches as soon as Sylvester Kemp died.

XVI

IT WAS the night of leaving. Lonnie had returned the picture of three little English girls to Wamb, in case he should leave. He was ready with the note for Bill, in case he should stay. And

now he walked through the mirrored hallways and salaamed before the ornate throne of the Maharajah.

He stated his business briefly. He was returning to America soon, and he hoped to make contact with the granddaughters of the venerable Sylvester Kemp.

"Mr. Kemp told me they were somewhere abroad. Perhaps you could favor me with their address."

"Mr. Kemp is demented," said the Maharajah crustily. "His granddaughters are dead. He won't admit it, of course, but I can tell you for a fact that they are."

"I'm very sorry to learn this," said Lonnie. "Are they *all* dead?"

"All. A peculiar circumstance, you think? You might call it an accident. Since you are leaving tonight I may as well tell you." The Maharajah rolled his dark eyes reminiscently. "Mr. Kemp was unfortunate in choosing an unworthy fakir to administer punishment to his granddaughters."

"Punishment?"

"For a trifling offense. He framed a delusion within his own mind. He thought them ungrateful and unworthy of this block of jungle he meant to leave to them. And so he called upon a Hindu magician to teach them a lesson. And the fakir, in his rash attempt to apply some ancient magic ritual, killed them."

"But he told me that—"

"He doesn't know," the Maharajah snapped. "I tell you they're dead."

XVII

IT WAS nearly midnight. Bill had already loaded his cases into the station wagon, bound for the nearest airport, when Lonnie returned from the Maharajah's.

"What's that paper you're tearing up, Lonnie?"

"A note I wrote you. But I'll tell you instead, Bill. I'm going to stay."

"Stay? What's got into you?"

"India—and things. I want to see some more of these jungles and do some hunting on my own. And then there's the theater in Delhi. And I haven't been to Calcutta. When I go back to New York I'd like to have a little of this exotic stuff down in black and white. Maybe I'll work up a play of my own."

"Yeah? Write in a part for me, Lonnie. You know my Uncle Ivan. He'd give the world to see me on the stage. What'll the play be about, Lonnie?"

"About a sap that meets a beautiful girl in the jungle, and she kisses him and runs away. And what does he do but forget about it and fly back home, not knowing that she could be found, if he wasn't so blind—"

"Unload those bags, men," Bill Handershire shouted. "I'm not going."

But at that moment Wamb came up and whispered something in Lonnie's ear.

"Not so fast on those bags, Bill," Lonnie snapped. "I've just learned that the leopard girl and her two feline pets are boarding the morning plane. Wamb tells me she's phoned for reservations clear through to New York."

XVIII

AS LONNIE well knew, Bill Handershire had a way about him. He was a handsome guy, with plenty of money and even more confidence. And a good racy line of chatter.

And so, on the several plane hops between India and New York, Lonnie found himself taking a back seat. Bill was the one who made the noise, just as he had been the one who pulled the trigger on the big game hunts.

But Lonnie was willing for it to be that way. After what he had seen in the cave of Koko-Jah, he was in no hurry to give this leopard trio the social rush. There would be plenty of time. This girl—who gave her name simply as Judy—would be in America through the theatrical season.

It was her plan, she said, to put herself in the hands of a good theatrical agent who would bill her for vaudeville.

It was then that Bill began to shine in the role of good angel. He sat beside her in the plane and kept up an amiable chatter.

"It's lucky I happened along," he said. "My connections with Broadway are positively the best. I know everybody."

"What he means," said Lonnie, "is that he knows me and I know everybody."

"What I mean," said Bill, turning his back on Lonnie, "is that my uncle and I are in the theater business to the tune of several million. Are you impressed, Miss—Miss—"

"Judy is the name."

"Right. You told me before, when we were sailing over India, Judy."

"I must not have made much impression," the girl smiled. And Lonnie thought, there's a smile that'll knock 'em dead. Not a practiced stage smile, by any means. Approximately ten times as beautiful because it was so radiant and natural. And with her looks—wow!

Bill was falling all over himself to make things right. "You made plenty of impression, right from the minute I saw you. Gosh, was I surprised!"

"Surprised? Why? Were you expecting someone, else?"

"Why—er—sort of. I'd had word that a friend was going to make this trip."

"I'm so sorry you were disap-

pointed," said Judy.

"It's all right. My pal Lonnie sort of got his wires crossed," said Bill. "He thought that someone we met in the jungle would be aboard. Come to think of it, you might know her. She has a pair of pet leopards, too. And she's been to London and New York and places."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know her," Judy said, her smile vanishing. "I think I'd better go back and see how my pets are getting along. I thought I heard one of them call me."

"I'll come with you," said Bill.

"It isn't necessary."

But Bill was glad to come, and Lonnie, tossing aside his morning paper, followed. Lonnie's nerves were growing tight because he knew too much. He couldn't look at this beautiful girl without recalling his first sight of her, being unwrapped from the fires that had changed her from a leopard.

Yes, this was the same person, or creature, or Protean *something* that Bill Handershire had come so near to shooting in the jungle. She was the same life that the Maharajah had wanted destroyed. Or at least one of them.

THE compartment which held the leopards had been fitted with inner walls of iron bars according to the airline's requirements. Within the barred doorway Matilda and Violet were pacing restlessly. Lonnie would have known them anywhere.

The smaller of the two animals stepped up to the door and tried to reach a paw through toward Bill.

"Hey, there, not so friendly, if you don't mind." Bill drew back.

"That's V. She must like you, Mr. Handershire," said Judy.

"Just so she likes me from a safe distance," Bill grumbled.

"Did you say her name was V?" Lonnie asked.

"That's her initial. See, it's formed in spots right over the back of her head. Isn't she pretty? She's really very beautiful."

"Very," Lonnie said. "She must come from a family of beauties. What's the other's name?"

"I call her Emmy. Or just plain M. That's her initial. You can find spots that form it, too, on the sides of her shoulders, though you have to use your imagination on the last line. She's very well behaved, don't you think?"

"No doubt came from a well behaved family," said Bill, trying to copy Lonnie's comments. "But I'll be darned if this hobby of keeping leopards isn't a new one on me. Do all the beautiful English girls in India go around with two pet leopards?"

"I shouldn't imagine so," Judy laughed.

"These sure do look to me like the pair Violet had," Bill said, adding. "Violet—that's the one I was telling you about. I met her when I was out on the big hunt. She pulled a mean trick on me—er—why does that leopard keep looking at me?"

"Which one?"

"V. She acts kinda hungry."

"Never mind her," said Judy. "You were saying that this girl Violet—"

"Yeah, she pulled a fast one. Upset my hunt and kidnapped me—she and her trick animals. And when I got back, the Maharajah tried to tell me I was crazy with the heat."

"That's too bad, Mr. Handershire. You must have been very angry at this girl Violet."

"Not so terribly." Bill shuffled embarrassedly and leaned his arm against the barred door. "The fact is, Lonnie and I were in the notion to strike out

through the jungle and find her—”

Bill was interrupted by the soothing pat of V's paw against his arm. He edged back from the door uncomfortably.

“Down, V. Don't bother him,” Judy reprimanded gently. “Sorry, Mr. Handershire. Please go on with your story. You were about to go and find her—”

“When we got word that a girl with two pet leopards was scheduled to board the morning plane. And so—”

“Yes, I see. And it turned out to be only me.” Judy sauntered along the aisle. “I'm so sorry, Mr. Handershire. You must have been very disappointed.”

“Hell, it wasn't such a bum steer,” Bill added hastily. “I've got no scruples against sailing around the world with a beautiful kid like you. And if I can do you some good getting you lined up for your show season in New York, it's a luck deal all around. I'm sure our pal Lonnie'll give us a break in his columns.”

“Will you, Lonnie?” the girl asked.

Lonnie was surprised at being addressed in so friendly a manner. He observed that her eyes were smiling at him. Her face was gentle and frank and very lovely. He returned her smile.

“Of course I'll give you a break, Judy. I think you deserve it.”

Bill hastily added a qualification. “That is, if your leopards know enough to get by. Do they have a few tricks? Are they smart?”

“What they know, Mr. Handershire,” said Judy, “would surprise you.”

XIX

WHEN the plane landed at New York, Lonnie took his leave of his companions. He and Judy exchanged a friendly so-long, and he gave her pet

leopards each a farewell pat. He left them knowing that Bill would take care of everything.

As he taxied away, he glanced back with a chuckle. The press photographers were on the job, catching Bill and Judy and the leopards from all the interesting angles.

The next thing Lonnie knew, there it was in the paper—a half page picture of the newest and brightest attraction in store for the new season's variety bills: The world famous Leopard Lady and her two trained jungle beasts, scheduled to appear next week.

“And that handsome male on the right,” the article read, “is New York's own Bill Handershire, appearing before the footlights for his first season. You guessed it, he'll be a part of the leopard act. That's his promise, and it's our bet he can make it good. His uncle is no other than Ivan Brunt, owner of the Zenith Theater.”

Lonnie tossed the paper aside with a groan. He kicked at the wastebasket. Had he not been neck-deep in work he'd have gone out and blasted Bill's plans into smoke.

Muttering blasphemies against his old pal, he reached for the telephone. But the door swung open and Bill strode in.

“Lonnie, old boy, you've got to help me. I've really got my foot in it this time.”

“I should say you have. What do you mean, trumping up a ham monkey act for Judy? What's the idea of throwing yourself into it? You can't act.”

“Hold it, hold it. Do you think I wanted to throw myself in? Did you ever hear of me wanting to prance on the stage and make a fool of myself?”

“Then how'd it happen?”

“Hell, I don't know. My enthusiasm

got away from me. There were the photographers taking pictures. And there I stood with my arm around Judy, and the leopards were looking up at me as if I were their daddy. And the reporters kept asking me questions and I had to say something."

"So you said you were part of the act?"

"I said I might be. Might. That's what I said. And so they stuck it in the paper—and you know how they dress things up. So what happens? My uncle gets me on the phone and says he's gone ahead and billed the act, with me as one of the headliners. And Lonnie, what do you think? That damned old hothead was so happy to know I'd turned actor he almost cried. Maybe I *can* act, who knows?"

"Bill Handershire," Lonnie rose with the air of a judge who had a painful duty to perform, "your uncle may own the Zenith. He may already have his filthy claws on this leopard attraction. But you're my pal, and if you go busting in on Judy's show, turning it into a leopard and monkey act, I'm going to pan you to high heaven."

XX

LONNIE thrust a huge bouquet of roses into the hands of the usher.

"Deliver these to the Leopard Girl, Haines, and tell her I said she was marvelous."

The usher gasped, "But Mr. Smith, everyone knows you never send flowers to actors."

"Do as I say." And with that Lonnie was off through the buzzing crowd. He didn't bother to take a taxi. His office was only five minutes away and he needed five minutes to frame the opening paragraph of his column.

In fact he would need all of five minutes to delete the flood of profanity that

welled up within him. The leopards and Judy had created something less than a sensation. The actors were good but the act stank. It stank. It was pure Ivan Brunt.

That was what Lonnie boiled to write as he swung out of the elevator and into his fortieth floor office.

The copy boy was waiting outside his door. Somewhere less than two blocks away the hungry linotypes were waiting for the first paragraph. Lonnie's fingers began banging the keys as soon as he struck the chair.

He smacked out a swift first paragraph, spun it out, let it sail to the floor. The same with a second. And a third.

The copy boy sauntered in. "Stuck, eh?"

Lonnie didn't hear him. He was too busy wasting paragraphs. There was something wrong with everything he wrote. He knew what it was. It was his private knowledge that those leopards were capable of a great deal more than their tonight's performance indicated.

Yes, he knew it. But thrusting that line down the public throat was risky.

He started again, and the copy boy repeated, "Stuck, eh?"

Then the telephone jangled and a buzz-saw voice said, "This is Ivan Brunt. You there, Smith?"

Lonnie thrust the telephone an arm's length away from him and muttered, "Go ahead."

"That leopard act. Give it your whole column. I don't give a damn about anything else. It's a headliner, see?"

"The leopards and the girl were okay," said Lonnie.

"Were they? That's great. I knew they would be."

"Weren't you there?"

"Couldn't make it," Ivan Brunt said. "Haven't even seen them yet."

Still out of town. But that act—I arranged it all by telephone. So it went over big, did it? How was my nephew?"

"Bill wasn't in it."

"Of course he was in it. I put him in—"

"I persuaded him to stay out," said Lonnie, "at least till he learns his high school stage directions."

"Well, I'm damned. I don't see how the act went over." Ivan Brunt's buzz-saw voice took on a tin edge of anger.

"Judy and the leopards put it over, that's how," Lonnie said calmly. "Those leopards are the fanciest trained animals that ever came to town. When they open their jaws and the people see those sharp teeth—"

"Don't talk to me about teeth. Tell me about the girl. Is she as beautiful as Bill said?" The buzz-saw voice suddenly softened to a coo.

"Sorry, I've no more time to talk," said Lonnie. "The copy boy's waiting."

HE hung up. His hands flew back to the typewriter. He threw out one more sheet, and the copy boy said, "stuck, eh?"

"Go wash your face," said Lonnie.

Then the telephone rang again. This time the buzz-saw was shrieking through steel pipes.

"This is Ivan Brunt. Did you hang up on me?"

"What is it now, Brunt?"

"You're gonna give me plenty on those leopards, aren't you?"

"I'll give you plenty of hell," Lonnie snapped. "Why couldn't you give that act some decent scenery and music? Your imitation jungle looked like a pigpen."

"You're not going to say that! Not in print!"

"I'm practically giving you a preview. The syndicate will have it in the morning."

"Lonnie, you can't do that to me. Listen. I spent five hundred dollars on that set—"

"Five hundred. You should have spent five thousand. And not less than four weeks preparing the show."

"Are you telling me how to run my business?"

"You should be in Hollywood making quickies. Go ahead and grind your teeth, Brunt. But you've got it coming. Look what you've done. The finest trained animals in the world have been dropped in your lap. And what do you do about it? You don't even come and see what you've got. You sit out there on your country estate and dictate a monkey act by telephone."

"Why you insolent—"

"That's this critic's view of it, Brunt, and I'm telling you straight. The finest pair of trained leopards in the world! And you run 'em onto a pig-sty stage with moth-eaten jungle scenery you must have dug out of the basement—"

"Stop it!"

"With moldy music—moldy flea-circus tricks that could be performed by a three-string puppet. That's what Ivan Brunt does with his talent. Too bad for the public that Ivan Brunt doesn't get some third-rate organ grinder to do his managing for him. But unfortunately Ivan Brunt has money, and he thinks he's a producer."

"Lonzo Smith, if you put anything in your column that remotely resembles that, I'll go straight to the syndicate and have you canned."

This time it was Ivan Brunt who hung up.

Lonnie drew a deep breath. "Where was I?"

The copy boy looked up from a notebook. "I took it all down in shorthand."

"Read it back to me," Lonnie said, throwing a fresh sheet into the type-

writer. "My public is waiting."

XXI

THREE days later Lonnie paid a visit to the apartment where Judy and her two leopards lived. All three of them met him at the door.

"Lonnie! I've been wanting to see you. Is it true that you've been fired?"

Judy's eyes were lovely. Lonnie felt refreshed just to be looking at her again.

"It was wonderful, what you wrote about us," she continued, "wasn't it, dears?" She tousled the leopard's heads. "But if that was the reason they fired you—"

"It doesn't matter," said Lonnie. "My business is to say what I think whenever I feel like it. And what I said about these leopards being the world's finest is straight from the heart."

He placed his hat over one of V's ears. She trotted over to the table and placed it down carefully with her big cunning paws.

"What are you going to do next, Lonnie?"

"That's what I came to talk over with you—you and your pets," Lonnie laughed. He picked up a sheet of stationery from the desk and sat down at one end of the studio couch. He began sketching on the paper. "Here we are. Act one, scene one. The heart of the jungle."

"Oh. A play!"

"Exactly. With you and V and M as the stars."

Judy sat down beside him. One of the leopards leaned against the end of the couch so close that its whiskers sometimes brushed his shoulder. The other nestled down on the floor by his feet.

"Some of the greatest plays have been written around star actors," said Lonnie. "It can't be done overnight. It

may take from now till Christmas to get ready for the opening night, but if you're willing to throw over your contract with Brunt—if you're willing to go into this proposition prepared for a straight five-year run—"

The leopard at Lonnie's shoulder straightened suddenly, and Judy's fingers lifted to her lips.

"Oh, no—nothing like that."

"Why not?" said Lonnie.

"Five years—that's too long."

"Two, then."

"No, really I couldn't. I never like to contract beyond the present season. You see, my pets and I go back to India every summer."

"Why not miss once?" Lonnie searched the girl's eyes. "Why not? You and your leopards could star in a play that would run for years if you'd only give up going back to India. Is there some reason you *must* go back? Would anything drastic happen if you didn't?"

Lonnie felt the electric tension that his question had wrought up, and he was aware of a direct exchange of looks between Judy and her pets. There didn't seem to be any answer except the negative shaking of Judy's head.

"Then suppose we take each other into confidence," said Lonnie. "There's some reason you have to go back to India every summer. Perhaps it's some religious ritual or other ceremony. Do you want to tell me—"

The doorbell rang and Judy sprang up hastily. "It's Bill. He phoned me he was coming over."

Lonnie caught her hand. "You haven't answered me, Judy. Are we to share confidences or not?"

"You're sweet, Lonnie," she smiled. "This play—I think you're doing it all for me—for us. But make it only for this season, please. You see, Lonnie, next year—I *won't be here.*"

XXII

BILL HANDERSHIRE poked his head in at the door. One of the leopards snarled at him. The reason was plain to see. He was carrying two beautiful tiger skins over his arm.

"Hi, friends. Call your dogs off, will you, madam? I'm peddling rugs and I'd like your undivided attention."

"Come in, Bill. I'll send the leopards into their cage-room if you'll be more comfortable."

"I'll endure it," said Bill. "If I'm to get in on the leopard act I'd just as well get used—oh-oh, my old pal Lonnie is among those present. You might put him in the cage if you want to do me a real favor. Look 'em over, friends. The handsomest tigers that ever came out of India."

Bill spread the two brilliant coats on the floor. He was so proud and happy he could hardly contain himself. As he patted one of the stuffed tiger heads, V slipped under his hand and turned her beautiful cat face up at him.

"Now look who's asking to be petted," Bill grinned. "You and I are getting real chummy, V. But don't forget I'm a collector of fancy coats, and I could sure make a place for yours if Judy ever gets tired of you. How about it, Judy?"

"No sale," the girl laughed uncomfortably. And the leopard looked up at him sulkily and walked away.

"I'll never forget the time I almost got a leopard just about that size," said Bill, swaggering across the room. "She was a beaut. It's the old story of the fine ones that get away."

"I remember well," said Judy. "I mean, you've spoken of it so often. I suppose you'll always regret that loss."

"Sure will," Bill said. "What's new, Lonnie? Did the curtain sure enough ring down on you? That uncle of

mine! The old brute's giving me troubles, too."

"What's he up to now?" Lonnie asked.

"I don't know. But he sent me orders to come see him tomorrow. I'll tremble in my shoes until it's over."

"There's a big game hunter for you, Judy," Lonnie cracked. "He braves the wild beasts of the jungle—"

"And he's afraid of a civilized man," Judy laughed.

"No one ever accused my uncle of being civilized," said Bill. "Did you ever see him?"

"I haven't had the pleasure," Judy said, "but he's sent me flowers. And I know he has an office in a skyscraper."

"That doesn't prove he shouldn't have a cage in the zoo. I tell you he's fierce."

"Fierce enough to cut off your allowance?" Lonnie asked.

"I'm afraid you've hit it. He's trying to make me go to work. You know, as an actor. He says acting is in my blood. And since you, Lonnie, have turned the heat on him, he's more determined than ever that he's going to run this leopard act the way he wants it." Bill made a sweeping gesture that ended with a smack on the table. "And he wants me in it."

"Then the act will be all yours, Bill," said Judy. "The leopards and I have quit."

XXIII

SOON after Bill left, another ring of the doorbell sounded, shrill and ominous. Judy's eyes betrayed surprise, then she remembered. There was a luncheon engagement dated for today. She turned to Lonnie.

"Won't you come into the library? I want you to write a line in my autograph book. . . . There. Please stay

until I've answered the door."

Lonnie was politely obedient. But before he could write, he heard the door open. Heavy footsteps entered. He heard the familiar buzz-saw voice of Ivan Brunt.

"M-m-m. So you're the leopard girl!"

"You're Mr. Brunt, I presume. Please have a chair. What lovely flowers!"

"That's the best these damned florists can do for twenty-five dollars. Not much of a nosegay for twenty-five," Brunt said.

Lonnie couldn't help seeing what the mirror in front of his eyes conveyed. He saw Judy motioning the big barrel-shaped man into a chair. Her manner was polite but extremely reserved.

"I'm sure," she said, "that the leopards will like those flowers."

"Leopards—haw! They're for you. I've been hearing plenty about your good looks. I figured it was just some more of Bill's rattlebrained raving. But, hell—"

"Look at Emmy, Mr. Brunt," Judy interrupted. "Emmy is delighted with the bouquet."

"Er—I was saying, Miss—er—Judy—if I'd *known* I'd brought fifty dollar's worth instead. Money's nothing to me. But good looking girls don't come on trees. Has anyone told you I'm a bachelor?"

"Please, Mr. Brunt. Here's Emmy coming over to thank you for the bouquet. Don't mind if she opens her mouth at you. She's just smiling."

Brunt's big puffy shoulders gave a frightened jerk. He got up from his chair and started to back away. Lonnie managed to turn back to the auto-graph book, though the picture of Brunt's bulbous, frightened face hung in his mind.

Ivan the Terrible was a favorite sub-

ject for amateur cartoonists among rehearsal casts. They invariably drew him with big, black circles under his eyes, a sharp fish-like nose, and teeth that were grinding in rage. They would portray him as yelling at a huddle of weak and quailing actors, hurling his huge shapeless bulk forward in an aspect of brutal attack.

The cartoonists should have seen him at this moment, thought Lonnie. A look of fear and trembling was a pleasant change in the appearance of Ivan the Terrible.

Judy politely called the animals away. She told them to come into their cage-room and stay there. And when Emmy momentarily hesitated and rose on the tips of her paws for another sniff at the flowers, Judy reprimanded softly.

"You see, M loves perfumes more than anything," Judy explained. "I can't deny her the pleasure of your flowers." She picked up the bouquet and placed it carefully on the floor of the cage-room and closed the bars upon her two pets.

THE action was highly satisfying to Ivan Brunt. Regardless of the fate of his twenty-five-dollar bouquet, his personal safety had been guaranteed and he was again himself.

"Leopards are very fond of perfumes, Mr. Brunt."

"As I was saying, I'm a bachelor—"

"There's nothing like perfume when you're training leopards to act."

"You probably already knew I was a bachelor. Or did you? Anyhow I've been thinking I'd drop over and see you—"

"Yes, Mr. Brunt, I remember your telephone call. I agreed that you might take me out to lunch. Shall we go at once?"

Brunt sat motionless while she got

into her coat. He was staring at the leopards in the cage-room. His pre-occupation with them had prevented his seeing Lonnie in the next room.

"Can't you close the door on them?"

"Why should I? They're penned up. You aren't afraid, are you?"

"They keep looking at me."

"Ordinarily they have the run of the house. None of my friends mind."

"Yeah? I don't like that crack. I'm your friend, ain't I? Look what a contract I gave you. I'm comin' to see you regular from now on. But I want you to keep 'em penned up when I'm here. See?"

"Why should I?"

"'Cause I don't like 'em watchin' me. It makes me think you've got 'em for protection."

"Why, Mr. Brunt, why should I need protection from you?"

Brunt's irritated rasping broke into an embarrassed laugh and his face grew red. He rose. "You're ready to go?"

"Yes, please. I'll have to get back early. I've a business letter to write this afternoon."

"Oh. You've got a boy friend, huh?"

"This is a business letter. You'll hear about it tomorrow, Mr. Brunt."

Lonnie smiled to himself. It was tactful of her not to mar her luncheon engagement by exploding the bad news in Brunt's face. He'd need a padded cell, thought Lonnie, when he learned that she was quitting.

Judy stepped to the arched doorway that opened into the library. She spoke loudly enough for Ivan Brunt to hear.

"Lonnie, I'm keeping a luncheon appointment. Would you mind staying with the leopards till I get back?"

"I'll be glad to, Judy." Lonnie gave her a farewell wave. Then he saw the thunderbolt strike.

Ivan the Terrible stood white and

trembling. To Lonnie he had the look of an immense rubber doll, half comic, half tragic, vibrating from a sudden blow on the head.

"Lonnie Smith! He's here!" the big man rasped. He craned his head toward the library to see the shocking fact for himself. His big jowls shuddered and his eyes bulged. "So two leopards aren't enough protection when I come to this place. You have to get that—that—"

Ivan Brunt didn't finish. He whirled and bolted for the door, and slammed it after him.

Lonnie wasn't sure whether it was Judy or one of the leopards that gave the sigh of relief.

XXIV

ON THE top of Lonnie's stack of mail was a letter from India.

Lonnie gave it a passing glance. There had been frequent mail from India. Just now telephones were ringing and the inevitable copy boy was waiting for an article.

Lonnie's days were like that. Since he'd been fired everything had tripled in speed. Several newspapers were after him to join their staffs, more were demanding letters, articles, or interviews. That's what his tirade against Ivan the Terrible had done for him.

By now the syndicate that had fired him was trying to reopen negotiations. For the public reaction had been on Lonnie's side. Some of his expressions had become catchwords of the theater. Of a lousy vaudeville act the slangsters would say. "It was pure Ivan Brunt."

Brunt was threatening to sue for slander on one hand; with the other he was hinting that he would bring Lonnie back to his pedestal if the young columnist would only make amends by writing some complimentary publicity.

But the one dominating idea in Lonnie's mind was to put over a four-bell leopard play.

Lonnie talked on the phone for twenty minutes with John Lorinski.

"I've heard about your proposed play, Lonnie," Lorinski began. "If there's anything I can do to help you—"

"Thanks, John. Now I know the play will have a chance." Lonnie said it almost reverently. If there was one wise old head on Broadway that Lonnie respected above every other, it was John Lorinski.

After twenty minutes Lorinski said, "I'm with you, my boy. If those leopards are as well trained and intelligent as you say, the play will go."

Lonnie hung up and went to work on his mail. The India letter—it was from Wamb. Lonnie opened it eagerly. Wamb's letters always started the old jungle fevers racing through his head.

"I'm learning more about Koko-Jah," the letter read. "I heard a quarrel between the Maharajah and Kemp. They both know about Kemp's granddaughters, all right, and Kemp has learned that the Maharajah meant to let someone kill them when they were leopards. For awhile it looked like murder was on its way, but the Maharajah is slippery and now everything is quiet again. Kemp is too old and sick to fight. But he does lots of fretting about his granddaughters these days. I don't know what will come of it. I'm sure he's too stubborn ever to face them after what he has done. I wish I could come to America now, but I know you would wish me to stay and watch what happens here."

Lonnie laid the letter down. "Wamb," he said aloud. "Wamb."

He picked up a telephone and had another brief talk with John Lorinski.

Then he turned to his typewriter and

wrote a cablegram.

Two nights later he received Wamb's cabled reply.

"Dear Friend: I have received your money and I am glad if I can help you in New York. I will be glad to act in your play and so will my elephant. I have followed your instructions, and will arrive with the elephant two weeks before Christmas. As to your question about the other matter, will talk with you when I get there. Loyally yours, Wamb."

XXV

THE big show opened during New Year's week.

It was a show of star actors—all new but all artists. The leopard girl and her two pets, together with Wamb and his elephant, made an unbeatable combination. It was a bit of the real India jungles transplanted.

Lonnie had succeeded in financing the gigantic business only after a terrific fight with established producers. But with John Lorinski's endorsement, together with some volunteer work on the part of Bill Handershire, the necessary backing was secured and the curtain rose on schedule.

The play was an instant hit.

From the opening night the public took to it with open arms. The critics, even to Lonnie's bitterest enemies—which is to say, the writers that could be bought off by Ivan Brunt—were unstinting in their praise. For "Jungle Rhapsody" was a masterful job.

It was exotic and highly romantic, and yet its flavor was so realistic that the theatergoers said it was the next best thing to a personal tour through the jungles of India.

It was packed with the thrills of big game hunting. And the big game was there—not off stage, but right before

the eyes. No one would ever forget the thrill of that first scene in which the two leopards, deep in their jungle lair, turned to listen to the approaching hunters. No one could fail to feel compassion for those gallant creatures when the trap began closing in on them.

And how they acted the part! Critics declared it the most phenomenal animal acting in the history of the stage.

The scenes were so convincing that the appearance of the elephant, roving tranquilly through the stage jungle, was entirely natural.

Later in the play it returned in the guise of a domesticated elephant with the hunting party. And here Wamb, as the young mahout, captured the hearts of the audience.

But most powerful of all was the final tragic scene in which the girl—Judy—was killed. This act was the revenge of the one remaining leopard against civilized man.

And now, too late, the leopard discovers that this girl it has struck down with one blow of its powerful paw is in reality an old friend—formerly a jungle girl, now a creature of civilization. Here the play ends. The leopard, stricken with remorse over its fatal mistake, gives itself up to the hunters.

The compelling effect of this drama exceeded Lonnie's highest expectations.

To Lonnie, and to Wamb as well, there came a unique proof that the jungle atmosphere was a faithful reproduction of the real thing. Wamb's elephant was unmistakably eager to get into each new performance. On that jungle stage as nowhere else in this new world the elephant felt at home.

The leopards, much to Lonnie's surprise, showed some of the same symptoms.

This was an eye-opener. That these beasts were in reality Judy's sisters he could not doubt. But that they

were nevertheless endowed with all the leopard instincts and traits of character was a point that gave him considerable worry.

As a matter of fact there had been times, during the dress rehearsals, when he had asked himself: Don't Matilda and Violet know this is a stage, not the real jungle?

But gradually they had disciplined themselves to Judy's demands. And so the play had gone into action. Lonnie had a big hit and he tried to believe that his worries were over.

But he knew better whenever he read the theater gossip.

"This play should run for ten years—unless those dangerous looking leopards get hungry and devour the elephant—or an outsider by the name of Brunt gets hungry and devours the leopard girl."

XXVI

"WHAT did you expect that play would do to me?" Bill Handershire asked Lonnie with an accusing eye as they sipped midnight coffee together. "When you wrote the thing, how'd you think I could take it?"

"I wasn't thinking of you at all," Lonnie said. "I've told you that a dozen times. Is Violet still preying on your mind?"

Bill gave a disgusted sigh. "You should know. Have I as much as looked at any other girl since we returned from India? I'm going back one of these days, Lonnie."

"I wouldn't. I don't think you'll find her. She's probably right here in New York if you only knew it."

Bill shook his head. "Strange how an hour like that can give a guy such a jolt. Did I tell you she kissed me before she rode away from me that day?"

"A hundred times," said Lonnie.

"No, just once or twice. But do you know, Lonnie, I get hunches about her sometimes. Maybe I'm psychic or something, but I get a hunch that she's never kissed anyone else since she kissed me—"

"Maybe you *are* psychic."

"And somehow, after seeing you play I know Violet's still out there in the jungle wondering if I'll come back."

"You're not psychic," said Lonnie. "Violet's here. Yes, here in New York. In fact—"

"Hell, man, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because—well, your Uncle Ivan's been keeping you busy, raking you over the coals every few days, trying to make something of you—first an actor—then a financier—"

"Lonnie Smith, if you've known all along that my jungle girl is here in New York, I'm going to punch you."

"Bill, she's here, but not like you think. I hate to tell you. I don't think you can take it."

"Oh, she's married, huh? Some Wall Street banker—"

"Nothing of the kind. She's been changed—changed until you wouldn't know her."

"You're all wet. Whatever clothes she wears, I'll know her."

"But you don't, Bill. I've watched you pat her on the head. I've watched her rub her face up against your shoulder and look adoringly at you while you rave about some long-forgotten football victory—"

"Are you crazy?" Bill leaned halfway across the table and glared hard.

"You'll think so when I tell you. One of the leopards is Violet, Bill."

"Come again."

"One of the leopards—the one Judy calls V—that's Violet—Judy's sister—under the spell of a Hindu curse."

Bill's eyes gathered a strange look. He rose and glowered down at Lonnie.

"Come on, pal. Time for you to get home. Your brain's running off at loose ends. Get a good night's sleep, pal. You'll be all right tomorrow."

XXVII

THERE was not time enough in Lonnie's life to see Judy half as often as he wanted to. But on those rare occasions when he took her to a restaurant or a night club after the evening's show everyone had a merry time. That is, Judy, Lonnie, and the leopards.

Judy rarely went anywhere without her pets. The inevitable photographs in the Sunday papers were splendid publicity for the show. But Judy wasn't angling for publicity. It was simply that those two sleek beautiful animals were her constant companions—yes and her protection, as Ivan Brunt had so aptly put it.

Laughingly Judy would tell Lonnie about Ivan Brunt.

"It's ridiculous, I know, but it's true," she told him one evening. "That man is on my trail all the time, Lonnie. When I go to a party I find him already there. And he fixes things so I'll be cornered with him, or have to eat at the same table. You never saw a big game hunter that was any more persistent."

Lonnie's frown grew deep when he heard these things.

"Don't take it so seriously," Judy laughed. "I'm only a girl and he's almost an old man. He's at least fifty-five."

"He's an old beast," Lonnie muttered.

"And besides I always take V and M with me. And you should see them open their jaws and bare their teeth when he starts in proposing."

"Does he propose?"

"Almost constantly. He's just like a

phonograph record. But one heavy purr from V turns him off."

"I don't like it," Lonnie said.

"Of course I don't pay any attention to him. But those pictures in the papers are going too far. Have you noticed the sly captions about my being seen frequently with the well-known millionaire and perennial bachelor?"

"They're starting rumors," said Lonnie. "The next thing you'll read that you're engaged. Then you'll suddenly discover yourself framed by one of his little schemes, and there'll be more pictures in the papers, and he'll boldly announce a wedding date."

"No, Lonnie, you don't mean that."

"I happen to know Ivan Brunt," Lonnie said savagely. "I know how he earned the name of Ivan the Terrible. He calls himself a bachelor. But if you could know his checkered social history you might think otherwise."

Lonnie mopped his forehead. He looked down at the leopards and said, "Pardon my rage, friends, but even you two spotted police may not be protection enough where Brunt is concerned."

Then he looked at Judy and laughed his evil mood away. "Come, let's dance."

It was a pretty little Italian Garden with a stringed orchestra that knew how to play Neapolitan Nights. They danced, and the leopards waited obediently at the table where they were tied by a slender silver leash.

Judy was studying Lonnie intently. "Why did you make that pretty little speech to the leopards?"

"When?" said Lonnie.

"A few minutes ago before we started dancing. You turned to them and said, 'Pardon my rage, friends.'"

"It is silly, isn't it?" Lonnie smiled. "Talking to them as if they understand every word we say. But sometimes I think they do."

Judy's eyes turned away from him. But he crushed her hand tightly in his and whispered, "Some day, Judy, I hope you'll tell me some of the things you're thinking."

"And what am I thinking?"

"Shall I guess? You're wishing that there weren't any leopards. That there would never be any leopards again. You're wishing that you were free."

"What makes you think I'm not free?"

Lonnie drew her off the dance floor and into an alcove where imitation stars twinkled down from the blue vaulted ceiling above the white pillars.

"Marry me, Judy."

"Lonnie—I—I couldn't."

"But I'm madly in love with you."

"You can't be. You don't know me, really, Lonnie."

"I want to know you. Tell me what it is."

"No—no—"

"Then marry me anyway. You do love me, don't you?" His lips brushed against hers. He folded her into his embrace and kissed her. And all the while her eyes tried to tell him no.

When he released her she whispered, "No, Lonnie. I don't dare love you. Haven't I told you—next summer I'll be gone."

XXVII

NEITHER Lonnie nor Wamb realized it was a trick that brought them to this particular booth in a Manhattan club restaurant. Nor did they suspect that a microphone had been planted to carry their conversation to the ears of Ivan Brunt.

For Ivan Brunt was not one to forget an enemy or give up a fight. He was shrewd, unscrupulous, treacherous. Several weeks ago when Judy had quit his show he had only redoubled his ef-

forts to capture her, by fair means or foul. And now, unknown to Lonnie, he was on the verge of moving mountains and continents to get control of Lonnie's Broadway hit.

Moreover, he was keen enough to sense that there was a mystery about Judy and her highly intelligent beasts. Vaguely he felt the remarkable kinship that existed between them, and the matter intrigued him. And he had guessed that between Lonnie and this young elephant boy there might be things to be learned.

But the conversation which came to Ivan Brunt over the wires on this occasion was a shock far beyond his anticipations. For Lonnie and the boy from India found themselves enclosed in a booth and apparently safe from the ears of the world. It was the first opportunity they had had for the long delayed confidential talk.

"Wamb," said Lonnie, "do you ever feel as if you've got to talk with someone about Judy and her sisters? It's like a bomb in my brain that keeps exploding."

"You and I are the only ones here that know, Mr. Smith," said Wamb. "If we don't tell, no one will ever know. Even if we told, not many would believe. These Americans are too practical and matter of fact. To them any talk of the mystical workings of Koko-Jah would belong in the ashcan."

"Perhaps. If I hadn't seen the serpent fires with my own eyes I would find it hard to believe. But thanks to you, Wamb, I actually saw Judy as she was being changed from a leopard into herself."

"And her sister Violet—"

"Yes, I saw her change too, from a beautiful girl into the leopard we call V. The old mystic left Matilda unchanged. I suppose next summer when they return to India it will be her turn to be-

come a girl, instead of a leopard."

"I assume so. I wonder if Matilda will bring them back to continue your leopard play."

Lonnie shook his head. "I can't picture Matilda taking over Judy's role. Maybe it's because I've never seen her except as a leopard. But somehow I can't imagine her having the lovely disposition that makes Judy perfect in her role."

"You're in love with Judy." Wamb's black eyes twinkled. "But I'm inclined to agree. I've watched both the leopards in rehearsal. Once in a while M will get angry and cuff a clumsy stage hand."

Lonnie shook his head. "That's bad. We've had lots of grief silencing the complaints over the freedom we give to those two vicious looking kittens. If my good friend Ivan Brunt knew they ever got angry and struck at someone he'd make trouble."

"But why shouldn't they get angry, the same as anyone else?" said Wamb. "They're people, just like we are."

"Right. Anyone's entitled to a little bad temper now and then. The trouble is, if they let themselves go with one good slap, it would be a knockout."

"I think," said Wamb, "that those persons who visit backstage during the performances should be warned."

"I've warned that girl Lilly several times that she's loitering there at her own risk," said Lonnie. "But some stagehand gave her a pass, and she keeps coming. I don't know who she is."

"My elephant doesn't like her," said Wamb.

THEY finished their sandwiches and lingered over their coffee cups.

"When I think of what Judy and her sisters must be going through," said Lonnie, "the wonder is that they con-

duct themselves with so little show of resentment. That curse the grandfather wished on them was a tragic thing. I wonder if there'll ever be any way to break it."

Wamb spoke with a low voice that was like an echo of centuries-old knowledge. "I think there is a way."

Lonnie studied the boy's Indian features, the sensitive nostrils, the smooth forehead that was like brown satin, the quick intelligent eyes. There was a depth to the streams of emotion that were this lad's nerves. Here in a drab Manhattan club, thought Lonnie, sits a mysterious youth who has kept faith with the fabulous secrets of long forgotten worlds.

"I think there is a way," Wamb repeated. "Koko-Jah knows it. Before I left, Sylvester Kemp tottered out to the big trees beyond the driveway. And there Koko-Jah, encased in his shell of bamboo, held a mystic communion with him."

Lonnie felt his fingertips tingle with anxiety. His lungs held off their breathing.

"Mr. Kemp," Wamb continued, "was like the madman of the legend, whose deadly grip upon his own throat threatens to choke himself, but having once started he is too stubborn to cease."

"Then Kemp has had no change of heart toward his granddaughters?"

"None. He would never admit that he was wrong. But his death can't be far away, and now that he has turned fresh hatreds upon the Maharajah, he wishes his granddaughters could live to make the Rajah trouble."

"The Rajah deserves the worst."

"And so Mr. Kemp asked Koko-Jah whether his granddaughters might have a respite from the evil spell. And Koko-Jah answered in the affirmative. To which Kemp asked, 'How?' at the same time dropping some handsome gold

coins into the catch-bucket that hangs upon Koko-Jah's chest."

"And the answer?"

"Koko-Jah said that the granddaughters should come for their annual transformation, bringing with them their chosen mates, such as they would wish to keep for life. If Koko-Jah approved these mates, he would see if he could call off the curse."

XXIX

RUMORS have a way of traveling swiftly from one show-house to another. Many of them Lonnie chose to throw into the ashcan. Such as the persistent story that Ivan Brunt had sworn he would buy "Jungle Rhapsody" and marry its star. Lonnie doubted that Ivan the Terrible could get away with either.

But when Lonnie heard, two days after his talk with Wamb, that Ivan the Terrible had got on the trail of something "hot" and had sent one of his most capable secretaries to India to check up on the accuracy of a tip, it sounded bad.

Lonnie got Wamb on the telephone. "How did you happen to choose that particular booth in that particular club as a place for me to meet you, Wamb?"

"Im sorry, Mr. Smith, but was it not you who sent the note to me to meet you at that booth?"

"I think we've been tricked, Wamb," Lonnie snapped. "That matter we talked about—we won't mention it to each other again until we see what is in the air."

"I understand, Mr. Smith. By the way, did Mr. Handershire find you? He was here at the theater inquiring."

"Thanks, Wamb."

When Bill strode into Lonnie's office that May afternoon he lacked his usual pep.

"It's Uncle Ivan," he groaned. "He's got us coming and going."

"Over my dead body," Lonnie snapped. "What's happened?"

"You know, Lonnie," Bill flopped into a chair and dropped his head over his arm on the desk, "I've been tinkering along on Uncle Ivan's bookkeeping, and I've been helping you on the financial end of your big hit. But this show stock has been turning over too fast for me to keep up with it—"

"So Ivan's got us."

"He owns us. All at once. Hook, line and sinker."

XXX

LONNIE and Bill entered the first stage door and took the inside steps three at a time. Before they reached the stage level they could hear the buzz-saw voice of Ivan the Terrible.

"There you are," Bill hissed. "It's a special rehearsal, like I told you. Just a few of the cast. It's all foolishness but it proves what I said. Uncle Ivan's got the show and he's gonna prove he's the boss from here on out. So right away he's changed a coupla lines and called this rehearsal."

"John Lorinski'll never stand for any line changing," said Lonnie. "Not by Ivan Brunt."

"Lorinski's out, I'll bet my hat," said Bill.

They came to a stop under the lower left floods. On the stage were Judy and her leopards, the big-game hunting hero, Wamb and his elephant, and three or four extras.

Off stage, to the right, was the same girl visitor named Lilly. Ivan Brunt was thumping back and forth past the footlights like an agitated barrel bouncing on end.

"Now you get the idea, boys and gals. That little change will give the audience

a couple of belly laughs—Er—ugh."

Brunt changed his buzz-saw twang to a low grating. He glared sullenly to see who had interrupted him. The corners of his mouth turned down, the sagging pockets under his eyes drew upward. Then he broke into a surly laugh.

"Yeah. Come in, boys. I thought you'd be around."

Lonnie nodded. One of the actors hurried over to him.

"He's giving us some changes, Lonnie," the actor said, "but I think it was better before—"

"Never mind what you think," Ivan Brunt roared. "If you want to stay on you'll do it my way."

"Where's Lorinski, Brunt?" Lonnie snapped. "He's the director."

"He *was* the director." Brunt froze an ugly smile while his words sank in. "But set your ten-cent mind at rest, Mr. Smith. I'll keep you on. You wrote the show. You wrote it as a slap at me. You thought you'd take the leopard girl out of my hands—"

"Please, Mr. Brunt." Judy stepped in to protest. The leopards were right with her, one on each side.

"So I'm keeping you on, Genius Smith, just for the fun of watching you squirm. Before I get through, by God, you'll—" Ivan Brunt's harsh talk gave way to inarticulate teeth-grinding, for the leopards were crowding him and he didn't like it. "Judy, call 'em off, damn it!"

"Get on the telephone, Brunt," Lonnie snapped. "Get John Lorinski back on the job."

There was a long moment of hard glaring. It was a showdown and very nearly a deadlock. But Lonnie repeated his order. And whether it was the added venom in his voice, or the fact that one of the leopards yawned and showed its teeth at the crucial moment, Ivan Brunt

gave ground. He swallowed hard and tried to replace the confident grin over his teeth.

"Lilly," he called. "Check up on this, will you? Find out why Lorinski's not here on the job. If it was something I said he shoulda known I was kidding —"

Lonnie and Bill went on their way.

"Who is this Lilly?" Lonnie asked as they jogged down the stairs. "Ever see her before?"

"I sent for her myself," said Bill. "She's an old flame of Uncle Ivan's. Used to act. Had more or less trouble with the police around here a few years ago and found life more pleasant in California. The police have forgot her by now. But she's never forgot Uncle Ivan. All I do is drop her a card mentioning that the old boy is still dripping with cash and not so stingy as he used to be. That's the line to fetch a last century's gold-digger. It fetched her quick."

"What the devil for?"

"I figured it would be the cheapest, quickest way to bust up his play for Judy. What's wrong, Lonnie? Have I pulled another boner?"

XXXI

JOHAN LORINSKI said there was only one thing left that Ivan Brunt hadn't conquered and that was the leopards.

To which Lonnie replied that they would no doubt be next.

Lorinski didn't understand. The inside information which had come from India was not generally known by anyone other than Lonnie and Wamb. But Lonnie was sure, now, that Ivan the Terrible would leave no stone unturned to make his victory complete.

"You're right, Lonnie," Bill admitted. "And while the old boy is win-

ning I'm positive he'll keep shooting till he wins himself a female. He's been boasting about it so long that now's his psychological moment to make good."

"Then it's a good thing," said Lonnie, "that he's still shy of those leopards. Judy'll need them."

The show had gone on without a break and was nearing the end of the season. All the backstage conflict was unknown to the public. Lonnie and John Lorinski had had their way a fair share of the time in spite of Brunt. The cast had demanded it.

In this sense Lonnie kept the upper hand. For his friends Judy and Wamb had the power to strike for him, in spite of contracts. To use that power would bring sudden death to the show.

But it was evident to Lonnie that Ivan Brunt was watching the leopards all the time. Their silent steps among mossy trees of the stage jungle, their obedience to each command, their moods and temperaments—all these were being scrutinized by the show's new owner.

"He's discovering the very thing I tried to tell you, Bill," Lonnie would whisper in confidence as the two of them watched nightly from the wings.

"You're crazy," Bill would reply. "He's not fool enough to think those animals could be human beings changed over. He just watches 'em that way to make sure they don't get hungry for a bite of Brunt steak."

One night the secretary who had flown to India for Brunt returned. He came to the theater within a few minutes after the evening performance.

Only Lonnie and Wamb could guess the nature of the news this emissary might bear. Lonnie mounted the elephant's head and sat in the saddle where he and Wamb could watch.

It happened that some photographers were working on Ivan Brunt at this

particular hour. The story of his ownership had made big news, and these photographers were after a human interest picture—Brunt with the two leopards.

Brunt was arguing his way out of it when he turned to see the newly arrived secretary.

"Pardon me, gents. Gotta have an important talk. Be back soon."

While he stepped outside to talk with the secretary, the photographers shook their heads. Their trouble stemmed from the fact that their subject was afraid.

"Even with the girl in the picture," one of them mentioned, "the old boy has the nervous jitters, as if he thinks they'll snap an arm off."

Some minutes later Ivan Brunt returned.

"He's had satisfying news," Lonnie whispered to Wamb. "You can see it in his face."

To everyone's surprise Brunt marched back to the leopards and put an arm around each.

"Come on, gals, let's get those pictures over with."

That was the beginning. And from that moment forward Ivan Brunt's manner of handling the beasts was so confident that he even slapped and cuffed them.

His rough treatment apparently set a new standard for the leopards themselves. The photographers had no more than got out the door when M let go a burst of bad temper.

Lonnie and Wamb both saw it happen and they agreed in their accounts to Judy afterward that Ivan Brunt had taken a brutal slap at Matilda—a slap intended to exalt Brunt's authority.

Whereupon, Matilda snapped back. With one swift toss of her spotted head she bit at the big man's hand. Then she turned and walked over to Judy with great dignity, leaving Brunt with

blood streaming from the leopard's toothmarks.

XXXII

LONNIE searched the papers the next day to see whether any account of the previous night's tragedy had leaked through to the public. It hadn't. Ivan Brunt evidently preferred to keep this humiliation strictly to himself.

It was Brunt's show, and he would have nothing to gain by discrediting his own animal stars.

But Lonnie guessed that something more ominous might come out of the accident. He called Judy on the phone. As he expected she was terribly upset. There had been more threats from Ivan Brunt.

"Don't let it get you, honey," said Lonnie. "I'll see you tonight and we'll get these troubles straightened out. How are the leopards?"

"They've been very fretful," she said, "though V has calmed down since Bill dropped over."

"Bill's her favorite. I've known it all along. But you'd better warn M to be careful whom she bites. Ivan Brunt might give her hydrophobia. All kidding aside, honey, let's don't let him get us down. The season's almost over and then I'm going back to India with you. We'll be married—"

"No—no, Lonnie. I'll never marry. I mustn't. I've tried to tell Ivan Brunt what I told you—"

"Don't waste your breath on him, honey."

"But he's given me until tonight to change my mind about him. If I don't he said it would be too bad."

"We'll talk later," said Lonnie. "I'll be late for the show. But you'll see that the leopards stall off any trouble until I get there."

XXXIII

IT WAS nine o'clock and Lonnie was in a bitter mood as he taxied through the bright lights of Broadway toward the theater where "Jungle Rhapsody" was playing.

He was late for the show because he had attended a meeting of actors, many of whom had aired grievances against Ivan Brunt. In spite of legal restrictions Brunt had found ways of canning employees whenever the whims of the moment suggested.

Suddenly Lonnie was aware that something had been changed in the electric signs over the theater entrance.

LILLY AND LEOPARDS IN "JUNGLE RHAPSODY" blazed forth in big letters.

Lonnie thrust a bill in the driver's hand and hurried to the stage door. As he mounted the steps to the stage level he could hear the thumping rhythms of jungle music. On the instant he knew how far along the evening's performance had progressed. A glance at his watch told him the scenes were running behind schedule approximately twenty minutes.

The first actor he saw was Wamb standing beside the elephant.

"What's happened, Wamb?"

"Big argument. Everybody quarreling," the boy said. His voice was calm, but the fire in his eyes betrayed trouble. "We wait for our cue out here, so I won't have a nervous elephant on my hands."

"Did Brunt put someone on in place of Judy?"

Wamb's eyes widened in alarm. "I don't know. I haven't had my scene with the leopard girl yet. But I know that Lorinski left. He went off with a couple of men—friends of Brunt's, I believe.

"Thugs!" Lonnie snapped, and

pounded on down the hall toward the dressing room stairs. But he paused, hearing familiar play lines in an unfamiliar voice.

He glanced on the stage from the right wings.

It was Lilly, all right. She was dressed in the leopard girl's costume, playing one of the big scenes. The two spotted animals were going through their paces in good style, though with evident nervousness.

As for the new leopard girl, Lonnie could tell at one glance that her acting was sheer corn.

XXXIV

"WHERE'S Judy?" Lonnie barked at every nervous stage hand he passed as he stormed down the hallway. "What happened to Judy?"

Someone answered that she was downstairs arguing with Brunt.

Lonnie took the stairs in three bounds. A rasping voice told him he was on the right trail. That angry buzz-saw effect was coming from the corridor between the rows of dressing rooms. Lonnie could hear Judy's furious outcries of protest.

"I'll take my leopards and go!" she cried. "You can't keep them. They're mine."

"Yours, hell. They're your *sisters*. They'll stay, whether you do or not. They know a good offer when they see one."

Lonnie, racing down the long corridor, broke into the conflict with a commanding shout. Brunt didn't turn to see who was coming. He grabbed Judy's arms and tried to force her into a room. She slipped out of his clutches, darted under his arm. But he tripped her and she fell. She looked up to see Lonnie coming, then backed away to safety.

For Lonnie's arms flew through the air to seize the big man by the collar. The jerk hurled Brunt off his feet. He thumped to the floor, but threw a hard kick that sent Lonnie staggering back against the wall. As the massive hulk scrambled to his feet, Lonnie lunged at him with fists.

A hard left landed, and Ivan Brunt tottered backward. He barely kept on his feet. A second blow pasted him to the wall, and the shudder of his white cheeks and the baggy pockets under his eyes was frightening.

But at that moment Lonnie saw the hard, evil eyes give a meaningful flick to the left. At once he was aware that four men were pouncing into the fray. Ivan Brunt had thrown some precautions into his plans for this showdown.

Lonnie's fists and knees and elbows kept fighting as long as he could move. But too many arms and ropes were trapping him. And between times he saw that Judy, too, was putting up a spirited scrap. She left nailmarks on the cheeks of one thug before he could tie her hands.

"Come on," said Brunt, when the men had finished their tying. "We'll all go up and see the play. You two will be my guests. And you'll be nice and quiet, so our four ushers won't have any trouble with you. Just keep your hands behind you so you won't attract any attention, my dears."

Ivan Brunt went on in his efforts at sarcasm while the party climbed the stairs. But sarcasm couldn't bother Lonnie when it came out of a battered and bruised face like Brunt's. Lonnie's fists had left their calling card. He caught a smile of praise from Judy.

"And don't be having ideas," said Brunt suspiciously. "I'll seat you well back from the wings, so you won't be whispering things to any of the pet animals."

XXXV

BRUNT'S four ushers were so efficient that Lonnie saw there was nothing to do but relax in his chair and watch the last of the play.

The pain of having his wrists bound was nothing to the suffering that came from watching the new leopard actress perform.

Even if Lilly could have acted, she looked completely out of place. Her too-too blonde hair and her orange polished nails were wrong. And in spite of the magical effects usually achieved by a daring jungle costume, Lilly's figure was far from convincing. She might have danced on tables in old-time saloons, but she certainly had never lived in the jungles by the strength and cunning of nerve and muscle.

But to Lonnie's and Judy's surprise, the show was going over. The audience had evidently accepted the girl star, in spite of her inadequacies, and had become locked in the suspense of the play itself.

"Listen to that hush!" Judy whispered. "M and V are going on like perfect troupers."

"The audience is eating it up, the girl's corn and all," said Lonnie. "But how can a ham heroine like that put this last big scene over? If she doesn't act that death scene, the whole play will flop."

"Lonnie!" The girl's whisper was fraught with terror.

"What's wrong?—Oh-oh!"

"Be still, you two," one of the guards growled in an undertone.

And so the final scene went on with Judy and Lonnie watching from the sidelines, not knowing whether what they were seeing was a mistake or just another of Ivan Brunt's whimsical changes.

Matilda, the larger of the two cats, had been pushed onto the stage from the opposite wing. Matilda instead of Violet.

"Has M ever played this part?" Lonnie whispered.

"No . . . And she mustn't! I'm afraid she can't! *Stop it!*" Judy hissed. "*Stop it! Don't let—*"

But one of the guards slapped a rough hand over Judy's mouth, and held it there—an act which brought a satisfied grin to Ivan Brunt's sorry countenance.

The crisis of the drama was at hand. The frightened tension of the audience could be felt on stage and off. It was the drama of the girl who had once lived in nature and was now returning from civilization. From the sense of the story she was fair prey for the jungle beasts. The leopard that had once been her friend didn't recognize her. It was to leap down from the overhanging branch and strike her over the head with its paw. Too late the leopard would discover whom it had struck. The girl would be dead.

And the play would close with the leopard, stricken with remorse, deliberately walking into the hunter's trap.

Lonnie held his breath. The big leopard crouched on the branch. It pounced. It struck the girl down with what appeared to be a heavy blow of the paw. She lay there.

A convincing portrayal of sudden death?

Now the leopard appeared to recognize what it had done.

Lonnie began to breathe again. The audience had swallowed it. M had come through perfectly, and was still coming through, right to the final curtain. And the girl held on without fluttering an eyelid, without seeming to breathe.

"It looked good," Lonnie whispered.

"Almost too good," said Judy.

The curtain was down. The players were lining up for the curtain calls.

But there were no curtain calls tonight. For the blonde girl named Lilly still lay where she had been struck down.

A few minutes later a physician pronounced her dead.

XXXVI

Lonnie looked out the window of Ivan Brunt's private plane and watched the stormy waves of the Atlantic thrashing tirelessly two miles beneath him. The window ahead was filled with the massive frame of Ivan Brunt. At other windows were the hired guards, and up ahead was Brunt's private pilot.

Lonnie looked across the aisle at Judy. Her eyes were closed. She had had nothing to say since being kidnapped and thrown aboard. Her leopard sisters, thought Lonnie, had also shown remarkable self control in the face of this base treatment.

As for himself, all he wanted was to talk with Judy, to reassure her about last night's tragedy. It was all an accident. It couldn't be considered anything else.

Bill Handershire sauntered down the aisle with a bitter scowl on his face.

"Those newscasters are having the darnedest time getting their stories straightened out," Bill said. "Now they're speculating on whether the leopard killed her because it wanted to, or because it was ordered to. The leopards, they say, were known to be obedient to their trainer, who had good reason to be jealous—"

"Quiet," said Lonnie. "Let her rest."

But Ivan Brunt craned his head around. "Sleepin' again, is she? Or just pretending?" As the girl's eyes

came open he added, "I thought so. You're not too anxious to hear what's in store for you, maybe. Well, count on me to haul out a few surprises. Sorta surprised myself, bringing Bill and Mr. Alonzo Smith along for company, but I'm gonna need 'em. Listening, Lonnie?"

"Listening."

"Were you surprised I had a plane already fixed up with a cage for your spotted relatives, Judy?"

Judy's only answer was the steady blaze of anger from her eyes.

"You were *so* ready," Bill commented, "it might look like you'd planned to run away from the scene of an accident."

"I'll admit," said Brunt, impervious to insult, "that we're taking this trip earlier than I'd expected. I meant to finish the season. We'll have to refund on a lotta seats. But last night we ran into a mess. Or shall we call it an indiscretion on the part of someone? I prefer to leave indiscretions completely in the hands of lawyers. *My* lawyers. I may save you, Judy. You and your sisters. If you're ready to accede to my wishes—"

Judy wasn't talking.

Lonnie tried to argue the fair facts as he saw them. He mentioned that Wamb and a few other friends who had seen the event from the inside would help straighten things out in the courts.

"Wamb knew that M had never played that part before. I saw him before I left. He promised he'd get together with Lorinski. The whole mix-up will come down on your head, Brunt. When you're working with dangerous animals it's high crime to tie up their trainer."

"You forget, Lonnie," Brunt sneered, "that these particular animals are endowed with moral responsibility."

Bill wanted to know what was meant by that, but his uncle went on pressing his apparent advantage.

"Judy knows what I'm talking about," said Brunt. "I didn't send a messenger to India for nothing. I've got inside information about those animals that I can turn into a proof of murder. That's the very leverage I crave."

"And what do you think you're going to do?" Lonnie asked.

"I've sorta mapped out a little India wedding for myself," said Brunt, "with plenty of riches thrown in."

"Marrying who?" Bill snapped.

"*One* of these three sisters. I don't give a damn which one just so I get my third of the wealth."

XXXVII

"**W**HAT'S all this talk about three sisters?" Bill demanded.

Judy broke her silence. "I'll tell you what Mr. Brunt means. He means the leopards. Somehow he has learned about the ancient Indian secrets of *transformation*. He's trying to get me to admit that these pets of mine are actually persons—persons who have been magically transformed. *He* thinks they are my sisters."

"I know damned well they're your sisters," Ivan Brunt barked. Then with a grin of satisfaction he trudged up the aisle to lose himself at the radio.

Judy glanced back to make certain that M and V were resting easily. Then she lapsed into silence and closed her eyes.

Bill Handershire was still scowling. At various other times Lonnie had tried to lead him into an understanding of these facts; Bill's imagination had naturally shrunk from their implications. Memories of the leopard he almost shot and the girl who took him for a leopard

ride in the jungle still ran too hot in his mind.

But at last he was accepting the idea. He and Lonnie seated themselves out of hearing of the others.

"What Judy just said is the nearest she's ever come to an admission," Lonnie whispered.

Bill nodded. "I guess she'd just as well admit it. Uncle Ivan doesn't talk that way unless he knows he's right. But darned if I know where he's taking us."

"We'll wind up at Judy's grandfather's estate. If I know anything about it we'll be none too soon. Old Sylvester Kemp hasn't much time left. My elephant boy received word yesterday that he is very feeble."

"I want to know about Violet," said Bill. "Do I get to see her again or don't I?"

"That's what I'm getting at," said Lonnie. "Wamb knows about these things. He's told me a lot. We went to the magician's cave together the day you got your tigers. We saw the unbelievable happen. We hid on the shelf and watched old Koko-Jah command the blue snake fires. We saw them work."

"What did they do?"

"Coiled around the different subjects—Violet and her two leopards. Before the fires got through they'd changed Violet into this leopard we call V—the one you've been so friendly with. And the beautiful cat you almost shot was transformed into Judy. But she doesn't bear any ill feeling toward you, Bill. She understands."

BILL took a long breath. For several minutes he looked down at the gray Atlantic dreamily. Finally he said, "These blue fires, Lonnie—were they painful?"

"Apparently not. No one winced

from any burning. But you could see it was a dreadful thing to them to think about. They had to do it. Their grandfather had got it in his head to punish them for nothing, so he fixed things with Koko-Jah. The girls would have to come on a certain day every year. That way each of the three could be the normal third of the trio every third year."

"Who's turn will it be next?"

"Figure it out for yourself. Violet last year, Judy this year, Matilda next—if nothing happens."

"What could happen?"

Here Lonnie was at a loss to answer with authority. He knew well enough what Ivan Brunt's intentions were; namely, to have the three sisters all restored to their normal lives.

"By granting them this favor," said Lonnie, "and by holding that theater murder over them as a club, Brunt intends to force his wishes upon them. You heard what he said. He expects to marry one of the three and inherit a third of Sylvester Kemp's fortune in the bargain."

Bill was up on his toes. "Damned if I don't feel like a fight. What the devil are we gonna do, Lonnie? Not sit by and let it happen!"

Lonnie lifted a restraining hand and again they talked in quiet voices, much to the satisfaction of the guards, who preferred their card game to trouble.

"From what I've learned of Koko-Jah's magic from Wamb," Lonnie said, "we'd better let Ivan Brunt sail right through with his plans. You see, the one known way that this curse can be lifted is a bit complicated. It calls for the three sisters to come to the cave *with* their prospective husbands. So—"

"I get it," Bill nodded, half grinning. "You and me and—who's the third?"

"Ivan Brunt. Don't be simple. That's his whole point. He's taking us along for convenience. But don't misunderstand me. My idea is that we play along with him and be model prisoners until he puts this across. *If* he can do it—you'll have Violet back, won't you?"

Bill nodded. "I sure hope so."

"And I'll have Judy."

"But Matilda—"

"I hope she understands all that's going on," said Lonnie. "If she does, then she'll catch our plan and know we really want to help her out too. The most important thing is to free her from her leopard form. After that she'll have a will of her own. Remember when she bit Brunt on the hand?"

"Now I do get it!" Bill whispered. "Sure, she'll make trouble for him."

"Well, we can't be sure. We don't know what she'll be like. But my guess is that she'll have the gumption to annul her marriage before your Uncle Ivan has a chance to complain about her cooking."

Bill rose abruptly. "See you later, Lonnie."

"Where are you going?"

"Back and have a talk with Violet."

XXXVIII

FROM their airport in India they made the last of their journey through heavy rains over soggy roads. There wasn't room enough for the whole party in the station wagon. Ivan Brunt had the decency to cut down his army to a guard of two. By this time it should have been evident to him that he needed none at all. Lonnie and Judy were seeing to it that he got the best of cooperation from all his prisoners, four-footed and otherwise.

They pulled into the driveway in front of Sylvester Kemp's house. One

of the servants, huddling under the white pillared arcade, waved them to stop. The raincoated figure came out to them through the streaming rain and pushed his wet face against the driver's window.

"Drive on around to the side door," the servant said. "Be very quiet on your way in. The old man's nearly gone."

Lonnie helped Judy out of the station wagon. The two leopards came out without any coaxing and yawned and stretched their supple limbs.

Brunt led the way up to the side entrance, and Bill and the two guards brought up the rear. Perhaps the guards had forgotten that there could have been danger of misconduct. Lonnie heard them remarking about the model behavior of the leopards. The whole adventure had become a fascinating one to these two outsiders, though they were plainly mystified by all talk of transformation.

Soon the whole party was inside the mammoth drawing room where huge portraits in gold frames gazed down at them.

The servants took care of making the party comfortable. Judy had long been estranged from this home. She and the leopards preferred the role of guests, not members of the household.

To Lonnie the place was oppressively quiet.

Numerous servants were moving to and fro, often going to the big white panelled door to listen, but never to enter.

The second living room beyond the arches was occupied by several neighbors of this region, mostly Hindus, sitting on pillows on the floor. Some were high officials. In the other hallway were clusters of brown men whom Lonnie remembered as servants of the Maharajah.

Soon the reason for their presence became known.

"The Maharajah himself is here," the head servant explained. "He, like these other guests, came to pay their last official respects to their neighbor before his death."

"Tell them to get through and be on their way," Ivan Brunt growled. "We want a couple words with the old man ourselves."

THE head servant took the order gracefully and acknowledged that the dying man would undoubtedly desire a word with his granddaughter.

But the head servant insisted that Sylvester Kemp must not be disturbed while talking with the Maharajah. The Maharajah was alone with Kemp.

And so there was an hour of impatient waiting.

Judy grew impatient. The servants were in a dilemma. They wanted to take her in. But they were afraid to burst in for fear of angering the Maharajah. Lonnie guessed that a last private business conference must be going on.

Judy's impatience was matched by that of the other guests. The Hindu merchants and high ranking officials began to whisper unkind words about the Maharajah.

He was making his private visit too long, they said. He was undoubtedly forcing his business upon the dying man. Yes, and taking unfair advantages, they were sure.

At last they agreed to put a stop to this prolonged conference, lest it carry on until the old man's spirit passed away.

A group of eight or ten of the turbaned brown-skinned men walked to the paneled door and demanded that a servant open it.

The servant swung the door open.

The slightest motions of Sylvester Kemp's fingers bade the men come in. Judy followed in their wake, and Lonnie accompanied her.

Suddenly all of those who had entered began surging back toward the doorway in a frenzy of terror. Why was the Maharajah lying on the floor?

"Why, indeed!" Lonnie heard someone gasp. "He's fallen dead!"

XXXIX

IT was obvious that the Maharajah had fallen as dead as a stone.

There he lay bedecked in all his splendor. The corner of his outer robe had caught on the chair when he fell, and hung like a white sail trimmed with gold braid. His white turban with the jeweled pin had clung tightly to his head. But his face was on a sorry twist against the floor, and the point of his black beard was bent up over his arrogant lips. His heavy eyelids were like dabs of brown wax.

"How did it happen?" one of the Hindu officials uttered, breaking the shocked silence of the group.

The question was directed at the feeble old Englishman who lay dying. The body had fallen a double arm's length of him.

"How did it happen?"

There was no one to help Sylvester Kemp answer the question. He and the Maharajah had been alone.

A cynical curl came to the old man's lips.

Lonnie, standing close beside Judy, felt her arms grow tense and rigid. He had wondered, in the past hour of waiting, how she would meet her estranged grandfather. His fullest sympathies had been with her. But little had he guessed that an ordeal like this would be in store.

"Grandfather, what have you done?"

Judy gasped breathlessly.

No more accusing words could have been spoken. On the instant the girl realized what she had said and pressed her fingers over her lips. But to her immense relief the rest of the onlookers had been mumbling and whispering. No one had heard her. Lonnie kept an arm around her, and she leaned weakly against him.

The leopards were close by. It struck Lonnie as curious and yet fitting that Bill knelt close beside Violet, whose cat-like face was staring intently upon the gruesome scene.

The crowd hushed. The old man's lips were moving and every one strained to catch his low whispery talk.

"... You'll see the reason ... in his hands."

Someone bent down and examined the papers that had fallen from the Maharajah's open hand. In a low mumbling voice the reader skimmed through a few quotations from the documents. Tell-tale evidence of what the Maharajah had attempted. Enough to prove that he had meant to take over the dying man's fortune almost entirely.

The seals had been affixed at an earlier date. All that was needed was Sylvester Kemp's signature. The open fountain pen had fallen to the floor.

"I knew ... it would come," Kemp murmured weakly. "I ... was ready."

The onlookers became a study in mixed emotions. Here was the man they had come to pay respect to before he went to his final rest. Here he was admitting that the final act of his life was murder. A planned murder—a murder that he had evidently conceived with some sadistic pleasure. A revengeful and mocking tone was in his fading voice.

"I knew ... what the 'Rajah would do ... when this night came," he repeated.

THE sounds of disagreement welled up from the throng. Some were whispering justifications. Some were gloating over the old man's revenge against an avaricious Maharajah. Others were angry and bitter. Some of these, thought Lonnie, had come to this deathbed only after overriding the dictates of their hatreds.

"But how? *How?*"

Over and above all the dismay and anger rose a general mystification over what seemed an impossible act of murder.

"How could I do it?" Sylvester Kemp muttered. "When I'm wronged ... I can buy my punishments ... Magic spells ... Poison needles."

His white fingers thrust the bed sheet back a few inches. A dangerous little weapon came into his grasp—a sliver of gleaming metal with a needle point.

"What can you do about it?" There was a snarl of challenge in Sylvester Kemp's hoarse speech. "Nothing! ... Consign me to hell? ... I'm going there ... anyway ... My life has been evil ... Full of hard words ... Harsh punishments ... But I couldn't die ... until I'd got him—"

His fingers gave the poison needle a flip. It fell to the floor beside the dead man. It was a supreme gesture of defiance, and the crowd edged backward as if afraid this cruel bitter old devil of a man might yet contaminate them.

"... until I'd got him worse," Kemp repeated, "worse than I got my granddaughters. I sent them ... into the jungle ... But he tried ... to have them killed ... So all this wealth ... would be ... his."

Judy broke out of Lonnie's grasp and moved slowly toward the bedside.

"Grandfather!"

"Stay back," one of the Hindu officials warned. "He's dangerous. He's mad."

But Judy walked on. The smaller of the two leopards followed close by her, and the larger one trailed along. The three of them stopped between the fallen Maharajah and the dying man's bedside.

"I know you," the old man said. His eyes shifted about. "I . . . I know you . . . You're—you're mine."

Lonnie read new emotions into that fading voice, the unfamiliar emotions of pity, compassion, even remorse and a plea for forgiveness.

Lonnie was not sure whether his interpretation was right or wrong. Before he could decide, he looked across to the other side of the crowd and saw that Ivan Brunt was elbowing his way to the front.

"I've brought them *back* to you, Mr. Kemp," Brunt blustered in a brutal but persuasive manner. "Brought 'em all the way back from America. *Can you fix things up for us?*"

XL

IN the presence of the numerous witnesses Sylvester Kemp fixed things.

In spite of the evil with which he had chosen to end his life, the officials agreed to honor his final words. For this was his own granddaughter, Judy.

Although most of those present could not understand the mysterious talk of retranformations that comprised most of the sketchy conversation, they were completely convinced that Sylvester Kemp's wealth was being left to his granddaughters.

Moreover, from Judy's continual reference to her "friends" who had brought her from America, it would seem that she placed her stamp of complete approval upon Ivan Brunt's claims to her friendship.

Most of the listeners were beside themselves with curiosity over Sylves-

ter Kemp's references to the old fakir named Koko-Jah.

There was an urgency in Kemp's orders to Ivan Brunt and Judy. He demanded that they wait no longer. He would rather die with the one last satisfaction of knowing that they were on the way to Koko-Jah's cave.

Strange as this seemed to the rest of the people, Ivan Brunt rounded up his American party—with the heartiest of cooperation from all concerned—and struck out, just at daybreak, for a mountain trail.

The rains had ceased. Over the black wet mountain of Koko-Jah the dawn was breaking blood-red through masses of blue clouds.

The guards followed after the party, lagging a stone's throw behind, troubled with the problem of keeping their direction over uncharted wilderness.

Within an hour a servant caught up with the party to announce that death had at last come to Sylvester Kemp.

The servant returned, and the party marched on over the deep-cut centuries-old trail toward the cave of Koko-Jah.

XLI

KOKO-JAH was there waiting.

Lonnie recognized the sawed-off yellow tree standing on the trail near the cave's entrance. Gaunt dark arms dangled from the tree's sides. A catch basket for coins hung within reach of those arms. From numerous holes in the upper part of the strange disguise, evil looking serpents poked their heads.

Ivan Brunt was not particularly delighted by what he saw. He relinquished his leadership inconspicuously as the party approached the ominous looking creature. Brunt dropped to the rear and glanced back toward the guards several yards distant.

The bamboo tree began to move. The little old fakir's feet were hardly visible. The tree seemed to float along beside the party.

Lonnie dropped some money in the catch basket and Bill Handershire did the same. The latter's contribution was accompanied by a scared grin and a mumbled comment. Catch baskets were an old Hindu custom, Bill supposed. Ivan Brunt shrugged.

The gestures of the gaunt brown arms bade the party stop and wait. Then the shell of bamboo was parked by the cave entrance and Koko-Jah, never turning to look at his customers, disappeared within.

The guards stationed themselves above the ledge. They had ceased to watch Ivan Brunt's well-behaved party and simply kept on the lookout for chance dangers from the dense jungles that spread far below.

Lonnie stood close beside Judy. His arms were tight around her. He wanted to whisper words of confidence. He didn't dare say anything. She might know what was coming. He didn't.

He had confided to her, however, in the course of their march over the mountains, that he had witnessed the previous transformation. And she had been glad. The knowledge that he had dared to do such a thing seemed to fill her with confidence.

But now she was silent and tense, and Lonnie understood that she too was facing an unknown fate. Though neither of them spoke, there was less of fear, Lonnie felt, because they stood together.

Curious though it was to look upon, a similar unspoken understanding existed between Bill and the smaller of the two leopards. He rested upon one knee beside Violet. From time to time he whispered in her ear.

Ivan Brunt paced in terrible agita-

tion except when he forced himself to stand still. His eyes darted back and forth. His hands were twitchy. Whenever he looked at the rest of the party he was obviously angered to see what poise they possessed. Most of the time, however, he stared at the large leopard.

His stare was hard with hatred. Lonnie couldn't help wondering whether there was not more of brutality than of lust in Ivan Brunt's anticipations. Marriage for a man of his nature could be little more than a relationship of cruelty.

Bill, too, was staring at the larger leopard. But his expression was one of sympathy.

Lonnie read Bill's thoughts. There could hardly be any doubt but what Matilda would be beautiful, as were her sisters.

XLII

"WE'LL go in now," said Judy. "Koho-Jah will be waiting."

They walked into the shadowy cavern. Lonnie remembered the smell. To him it was a blend of fumes and darkness and coiling snakes. It was more than a combination of odors. It was a feeling of the proximity of centuries-old mysteries. It was an almost tangible contact with an unseen past.

As they moved beyond the bend where solid blackness reigned, they came into the dim rock-walled room. Their eyes adjusted to the yellow light from the tongue of fire that blazed steadily above the black mound.

The two scintillant dots beyond it were the eyes of Koko-Jah. Like a weird copper statue the little brown mystic sat waiting. His bright little eyes were making no effort to hypnotize, or even to concentrate upon, his guests. And yet to come into his line

of vision gave Lonnie a feeling like an electric shock.

Dozens of vicious looking snakes, Lonnie was aware, were poking their heads out of the apertures in the mud-brick altar. He wanted to hold back at a reasonably safe distance.

But Judy took her place at the edge of the narrow rim of shadow which surrounded the base of the stack of bricks. Lonnie stationed himself close by her.

The smaller leopard came up beside him. Bill and Ivan Brunt, both very white and nervous, stood directly opposite the little Hindu master of mysteries.

"Here we are." Ivan Brunt's sullen voice cut the cold silence. The yellow flame wavered from the rasping of his tone. "Sylvester Kemp said you'd undo your punishment job. All right, we're set for it."

Koho-Jah spat at the fire. The restless snakes crawled into the altar and disappeared.

"Stay where you are," Koho-Jah said in his crackled old voice. "The flames will bathe each of you. But don't move away. The flames have no burns."

Lonnie heard Ivan Brunt echo the words.

"Flames, eh? They'd better not burn."

Terror struck through Lonnie's mind. He knew that Brunt was a coward at heart. Suppose Brunt didn't have the stamina to see it through. A walkout at this crucial moment could dash the whole plan—

The first tongues of snaky blue flames were already darting outward, straight at Lonnie.

On impulse he himself might leap back. He might lose control of his nerves and run out of this ghostly place. The thought chilled him.

But the next instant he found there

was no need for fright on that score. His feet were suddenly glued to the ground. He couldn't move.

The swift snake-like ribbons of cold fire spun around his ankles and up over his straight rigid body.

XLIII

LONNIE felt nothing beyond the tension of being held rigid and immovable.

He well remembered, from a year before, that Violet had been caused to bend downward as she underwent her weird transformation. But he was not being bent forward, and he knew, too, that he wasn't being changed.

The only change he could notice as yet was that of Violet. The blue wrappings were already spinning furiously around her rear feet and legs, changing them with astonishing speed from leopard's paws into human feet and ankles. Then the cuffs of her sport slacks appeared.

That to Lonnie was a symbol of the success that was in the making. He could hardly wait for a first sight of Matilda, around whom the flames were now doing a lively dance.

But both Lonnie and Judy were so swiftly swept by the spinning fires that their part of the ceremony was soon over.

Koko-Jah waved them to step aside and they obeyed.

"He wants us to go," Judy whispered in Lonnie's ear.

Yes, Koko-Jah's motions were plain. The two of them were being invited to leave.

Lonnie took a final look at the four remaining figures—two men and two leopard-like forms—all of them now thoroughly wrapped by the endless blue streamers of cold flame.

Then Lonnie walked away, with

Judy clinging to his arm. Her step was eager, and there was an exuberance in her whisper.

"It's going to work! At last we'll be free. Lonnie, I'm so happy!"

Outside the cave entrance they followed the start of the trail up to a higher level and hiked over the rocks to the ledge where the guards were waiting.

Within five minutes Bill came out leading the girl Violet by the arm. Both he and his one-time jungle girl were flushed with excitement, laughing and caressing as they ascended the trail.

Judy called to them and ran to meet them. She and Violet embraced each other in such a sisterly greeting as Lonnie had never seen on any stage.

Lonnie and Bill stood by awaiting their turns to add their words of jubilation. Lonnie could tell that Bill, in spite of temporary symptoms of embarrassment, was unchanged in his affections. His dreams of the past year were at last answered.

But within a few minutes everyone stopped to look down over the ledge. Another figure had emerged. It was Koko-Jah. He was again donning his bamboo-tree costume.

"Have you finished?" Lonnie called down.

"It has all been done," Koko-Jah cackled. "No more can I ever do. No more can I ever undo."

WHEREWITH the little old mystic began to trudge away, with snakes peeking out of his wooden garment.

Lonnie stared down at the empty trail in front of the cave. He turned hastily to reassure Judy.

"Don't worry, she'll be coming out right away. I'm sure he's changed her back."

"You mean Matilda?" said Judy. She and Violet exchanged swift smiles. "Whatever gave you the idea, Lonnie, that there were *three* of us sisters?"

"I've known it all along," said Lonnie. "My elephant boy found a school-girl picture of the three of you."

"A picture?" Violet said in surprise. "Oh, yes. A chum from England must have been the third. But there are only two of us."

"But Matilda has to be your third sister."

"No. I've wanted to tell you, Lonnie," Judy smiled. "But I couldn't bear to disillusion Ivan Brunt. He'll be terribly enraged. But how else could I have got Violet back? I did the right thing, I know. Don't you think so, Bill?"

"No question about it," Bill grinned, holding an arm tightly around Violet's waist. "But who the hell is Matilda?"

"She's a traveling companion we made friends with in the jungle. Of course we taught her a lot—"

"And she taught us a lot," said Judy. "When it comes to genuine leopards—I don't mean imitations like Violet and I were—but *real* ones—well, Matilda's the smartest and swiftest and cleverest creature in the whole jungle. She could lead any lion a merry chase."

Before Lonnie could catch his breath he looked down to see the last two figures emerge from the cave.

One was Matilda, unchanged.

The other was also a leopard, one that Lonnie had never seen before—a huge, shaggy, awkward old male.

The two leopards leaped down over the rocks.

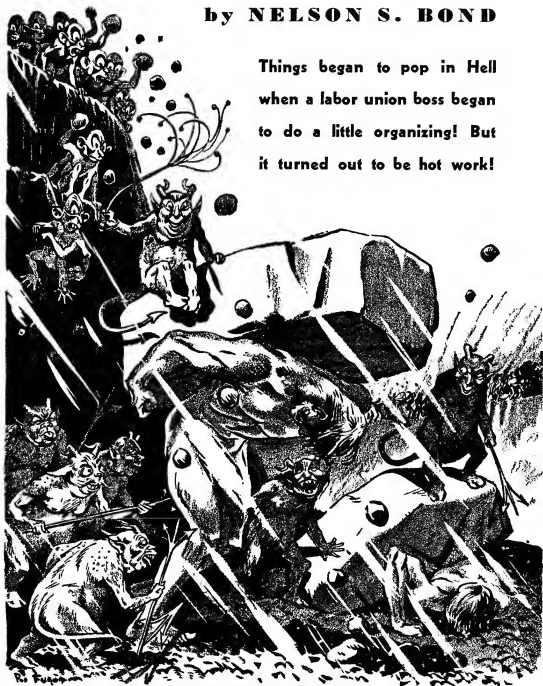
Violet started to call to Matilda to come back. But Judy suggested that after a few days' merry chase their pet would return to them—alone.

The two beasts bounded away and lost themselves in the jungle.

UNION IN GEHENNA

by NELSON S. BOND

Things began to pop in Hell
when a labor union boss began
to do a little organizing! But
it turned out to be hot work!



Brazzleton groaned as a shower of stones struck him

BRAGGLESTON'S last earthly thought was that he had made a grievous error in not keeping abreast with the times, and with the changing tempo of American thought. Fourteen years as a professional labor agitator should have trained him to sense when it was unsafe to suggest strikes. But he had chosen a morning right after two American ships had been sunk by Nazi subs . . . a troop of gallant American troops had been trapped by Jap yellow-bellies . . . and his audience was in no mood to dicker.

Braggleston had neither the time to duck nor offer his stock arguments on "Constitutional rights." It was unimportant that he knew all the answers. His opponent wasn't asking any questions. He was swinging—but ardently! Braggleston had ideas aplenty but no time to present them, words to burn but no time to marshal them. He *did* manage to bleat out one garbled plea.

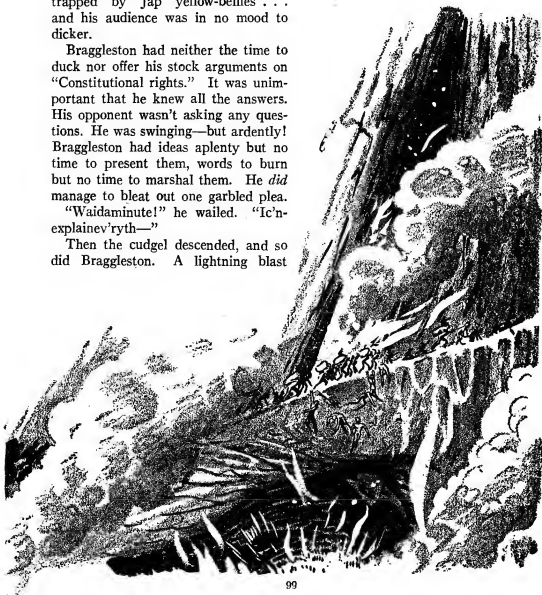
"Waidamminute!" he wailed. "Ic'n-explainev'ryth—"

Then the cudgel descended, and so did Braggleston. A lightning blast

seared his brain. His knees buckled under him, his stomach churned, and solid asphalt raced up to meet him. He was dimly aware of vast winds howling . . . of hurtling flight through fathomless infinitudes of gloom . . . of plucking claws and voids that shrieked in agony. And then . . .

And then a fretful voice said, "Braggleston!"

"Go 'way!" said Braggleston. He



was tired and ill and he had a splitting headache. He was uncomfortable. His bed was hard, the sheets were hot, and what kind of a dump was this, anyway? "Go 'way!" he said again.

But the voice was impatient and spiteful. "Hector Braggleston," it said, "get up!" Braggleston was lying face down. Now a pincer of pain nipped his northernmost exposure viciously, bringing him to his feet with a roar.

"Hey!" shouted Braggleston. "What's the big idea? Who the hell—"

His protest died in an awed gasp. His eyes bulged as he stared about him. Small wonder he had found his "bed" uncomfortable. Its slats were bars of cherry-red steel, and its mattress was a nest of scorching white coals! His body, where it had rested on the grill, was an angry pink, mottled with a latticework of freshly toasted bisque. He looked very much like a swatch of old and fragile and valuable lace. Not an unattractive effect, but—terrifying! He gulped. Sudden comprehension brought horror to his eyes.

"*H-hell!*" he repeated in a feeble voice.

His companion laughed hollowly. With almost casual disinterest he flicked his tail at Hector, stinging him twice on the buttocks with its fiery, spear-tipped end.

"Burns hurt?" he asked conversationally. "I'll get you some nice refreshing carbohic if you want. No? Oh, well—nothing suits you humans. Let's get going!"

BRAGGLESTON winced, evaded a whisk of the tail, and stared at his host. He wasn't much to look at. He was short and skinny, a dusky scarlet in tone from his hairless pate to his cloven hooves. Two stunted, curly horns, jet and glossy, jutted from his temples. One had been broken in

some ancient accident and had been crudely patched with a gummy composition. He looked tired, and he needed a shave.

"Y-you," stammered Braggleston, "y-you're a *demon!*"

"And *you*," snapped his companion petulantly, "are a blessed fool! Do you see any wings on my shoulders? I'm *not* a Demon; I'm an Imp. Come on, let's go!"

"Go! But—Ouch! Stop swishing that thing!—where are we going?"

"To work, of course. Do you think that Hell is just one long, joyous orgy? You've been assigned to six hundred years at hard labor on Hades Works Project No. 608, Avernus Superhighway No. Three."

"Six hun—" Braggleston swallowed hard. "B-but how long am I in for, Your Hon—I mean, Mr. Imp?"

"Petigone's the name. Call me Pete. Everyone else does. In for? Oh, not so long, considering we've got all of eternity before us. You really want to know?" Pete twisted his tail around before him, held its tip to his lips. It vibrated gently. "Lil? Get me the Assignment Bureau like a bad girl, will you? Oh, that you, Stinky? Say, what's the book on Hector Braggleston? No—I said *Braggleston*. 'B' as in 'brothel,' 'R' as in 'robbery,' 'A' as in 'adult—'

"What! Seventeen aeons? You're full of brimstone! You must be thinking of Billy Haggleston, the necromancer—he's being disemboweled by vultures out in West Abaddon. The guy I mean is *Hector*—Oh, got it? Two? Thanks, fiend!"

He turned to Braggleston. "See? I was right. You can do it standing on your head. Only two hundred thousand."

"Two . . . hundred thousand . . . years!" moaned Hector.

"Why, no," corrected Pete cheerfully. "Centuries. Shall we go now?"

IT WAS a long and arduous journey, one quite beyond Braggleston's normal physical capabilities. Their trail took them across scorching acres of grill-work, each new pit being hotter than those before it. Hector, whose feet were killing him, would have succumbed to sheer despair but for the stimulating sight of others even less fortunate than himself whose duty it was to crawl beneath the grates on all fours and rake out the clinkers.

They skirted a lake of molten lava over which a few hundred thousand shrieking souls dangled on skewers of white-hot steel, waded a brooklet of slaked lime wherefrom a slowly broiling erstwhile warlord, mounted on a spit and ceaselessly revolving over a charcoal trough, vainly attempted to assuage his thirst, and paused for a moment beside a raised dais upon which lay curled a monstrous blind slug.

Pete, intercepting Hector's horrified gaze, grinned proudly.

"Cute, eh? Want to see how it works? Here, you!"

He arched his tail, adroitly spearing in mid-flight the flayed carcass of a human who was being used by two ogres as a shuttlecock in their game of badminton. The raw thing squirmed and shrieked. One of the ogres grumbled, "Hey, Pete—that's not fair! He's ours! Go get yourself another—"

"Aw, go to Heaven!" chuckled the Imp. He flung the human onto the dais. "Watch this!" he told Braggleston.

With the impact, a webwork of fine wires broke from the top and sides of the enclosure, criss-crossed through the body, slicing it into a pile of infinitesimal fragments. The pale slug lifted its

head, waved it slowly from side to side, wriggled to the palpitating heap and began to nose the pieces drearily.

"Now he's got to put it together again," explained Pete gleefully. "A sort of tridimensional jigsaw puzzle, see? Only he's blind, and his pores exhude acid. So every time he touches a piece, it squirms away from him. It takes him five thousand years to finish the job. Then as soon as it's done, the wires drop and cut the body into pieces again. Isn't it fun?"

Braggleston shuddered. "Do I—" he asked hollowly, "Will I—?"

Pete snorted indignantly. "Of course not! That's just for *small* offenses. You brought an enviable record to Hades with you, Braggleston. An entire lifetime of sin and violence. The Committee likes that. To show their appreciation they've invented a whole new series of beautiful mental tortures for you. Nothing so crass and unsubtle as—but here we are."

The rising mists of steam had shredded away. Hector saw that they stood now at the base of a towering, rock-faced mountain up whose grim cliffs, threading away to heights lost in incredible distance, there clung a narrow, precarious footpath dotted with the tiny motes of laboring souls.

He stared at his companion stupidly.

"Here," he repeated, "we are. But where are we?"

"Mount Avernus. The main idea is to make a highway out of that footpath. Of course, the difficulty is there are no road building materials up there, so they must be pushed up from down here. Well, grab a stone."

HE JABBED a thumb nonchalantly toward a huge pile of boulders at the foot of the path. Braggleston, eyes following the Imp's gesture, started violently.

"Stones! B-but those rocks are as big as houses. I couldn't possibly—"

Pete frowned. His tail, which had suddenly and frighteningly split into nine saw-toothed, barbed wire lashes, made tentative little whipping motions towards Braggleston's posterior.

"What did you expect for a lifetime of fun?" demanded the Imp petulantly. "Pebbles? Get going, Braggleston. And mind you watch the vipers at the second turn. They're His Majesty's special pets. He gets angry if anyone bothers them. Well, so long. See you later."

Hector peered at the dim heights anxiously. "Up there, you mean?" he faltered. "You'll meet me again up there?"

"You'll find out!" chuckled Pete. He grinned evilly.

IT DID not take Hector long to learn the meaning of Pete's amusement. At the base of the Mount he chose the smallest of the boulders he could—taking into consideration the malevolent appraisal of a pale green, Argus-eyed succubus equipped with four sets of foot-long yellow fangs—and by dint of excruciating effort succeeded in getting it started up the steep slope.

Petigone had warned him of the vipers; he had said nothing of the other hazards that beset the trail. Braggleston successfully negotiated the viper nest, the cactus bed, the mile of glacial ice, and the colony of soldier-ants who greeted him with hungry enthusiasm shortly after he had shouldered his burden through a rivulet of stale molasses; he was not prepared, however, for the sudden deluge of apes who came scrambling down upon him just as he was painstakingly negotiating his boulder around a hairpin curve on the crest of a sheer cliff yawning one mile or more above the flaming

pits of central Gehenna.

These beasts, leprous-white and playful, armed with sharp tweezers and fuzzy feather dusters even more embarrassing to a human whose clothing had not shared his afterworld immortality, caught him completely unawares. Like a snowy host they burst down upon him from hillside, nook, and cranny, running between his legs, climbing on his shoulders to belabor his sweating head with their tools of torment, chattering, piping, squeaking, tickling.

In vain Braggleston screamed threats and babbled pleas. The mischievous Apes of Avernus continued to cavort gayly with their unwilling playmate. Prehensile tails curled wickedly about his stumbling limbs, pincers pinched, sticks poked, and feathers tickled. Braggleston's boulder lurched and skidded as Braggleston tottered uncertainly. The path was narrow and the cliff was steep. The boulder swayed and tottered, ceased its forward motion and began to roll back, crushingly and inexorably, upon Hector.

With a scream of despair Hector gave up the unequal struggle. His shoulders ceased to brake the stone; it gathered momentum. Braggleston tugged a yammering ape from its perch about his ears; stared wildly for a way to escape this unleashed Juggernaut. There was no way upward past the stone. The stone was pursuing him downward. Only one way was open—off the path. With a howl of despair, Braggleston hurled himself into space.

Torrid wind shrieked past his ears. The stony cellar of Hell rose up to meet his plummeting body. There was a moment of flame-bright, shocking pain—then darkness.

THEN out of the darkness a cold so fierce it numbed his burning body.

And out of the silence, the amused voice of Petigone.

"What, back so soon, Braggleston?"

Hector moaned and opened his eyes. His flesh was bruised and broken, his body was one huge ache from index to instep—but his bones were solid. He staggered to his feet weakly.

"D-don't!" he chattered.

Pete lowered reluctantly the pail of frothing semi-liquid with which he had already once doused Braggleston, the dwindling contents of which he was now preparing to toss at his guest.

"There's just no *pleasing* you humans!" he grumbled. "Fire's too hot and water's too cold. Let an Imp try to be helpful and—"

"Th-that stuff's not w-water!" gasped Hector.

"Liquid oxygen," sniffed Pete. "Practically the same thing." But he chucked the pail at the screaming head of a nearby soul buried to its chin in a mound of scorpions and stared at Hector seriously.

"How far did you get?"

Hector pointed to the cliff above them. "I was doing all right," he babbled. "I was doing fine until those damned apes—"

"Now tut!" said Pete reprovingly. "*They're* not damned—you are. The Apes, eh? I thought you wouldn't get past them. They'll stop a new man every time. Well, better luck on your next attempt."

Braggleston stared at him bleakly. "Next?"

"But of course! You didn't think your task was over, did you? My badness, man, you've just started! Why, you cannot even go to the second punishment until you've succeeded in getting a rock to the top of the mountain. But cheer up. You'll get the hang of it after awhile." He grinned at Hector as an afterthought struck him. "Tick-

lish, eh? Was that the trouble?"

Braggleston nodded. "Those feather dusters—"

"Tell you what," said Pete, "I like to see my charges get a square deal. I'll give you a little bath in sulphuric before you start the next trip. What do you say? It would give you nice cal-louses—"

"Never mind!" said Hector hastily.

Petigone shrugged. And together they walked back to the base of the hill whence Braggleston had started his ill-fated journey.

THE boulder he got this time was larger, but he knew the path and its hazards better, having been over it once before, and would have made better time on his second attempt had it not been that he started just a few rods behind an ancient soul that moaned and screamed and gibbered as it shouldered its boulder up the path and paused every quarter mile or so to rest, heaving, puffing, and weeping.

This was most annoying, particularly since the old soul always chose to rest immediately after having successfully passed one of the roadway's many hazards. Thus, time and again Braggleston was forced to stop in the center of a most uncomfortable situation.

Nevertheless, he persevered. He was not a courageous man, but what his character lacked in fortitude was compensated for by dogged persistence. Fortunately too, he was a man of limited imagination. Thus the road before him was peopled only by the terrors that actually presented themselves, and not by the host of fancied dreadful-nesses that sapped the strength of such souls as the one before him.

It was no pink tea, but somehow he endured again the glacial stream, the vipers, the pit of oiled ballbearings upon which his burden could barely

find traction, the tunnel of fuming sulphur through which his path led him. Still he looked forward with foreboding to the time when he would again attain the cliff where romped the mischievous apes. And as each new torture was passed this stumbling block came ever closer, until at last it lay a scant quarter mile before him.

Braggleston steeled himself for the ordeal to come. He must not, he told himself feverishly, this time allow the apes to turn him from his course. Let them pinch, pull, push, or tickle all they wished; somehow he must get through. Earth or Hell, they were still beasts and he was a man. There must be *some* way to best them. Human intelligence . . . presence of mind. . . .

Braggleston laughed grimly. Presence of mind was a poor substitute for what he really wanted—absence of body.

Then the wayfarer before him had reached the Apes' domain. Braggleston could hear his screams of loud torment, about the edge of his own boulder could see the old soul's frenzied struggle to propel his burden upward and at the same time fight off the onslaught of the pallid beasts.

And now Hector, too, had come within the boundaries of the Apes' interest. He set his jaw, pressed forward stubbornly. Fiercely he subdued the urge to let his rock go, beat back the chattering hosts that burst down upon him. . . .

Then suddenly his ears stormed with the brazen clamor of a vast and distant gong. Great, echoing waves of sound boomed out across the steamy mists of Hades. In the wake of its groaning came a bruit like the sighing of a billion weary hearts. And suddenly the Apes were gone. Chattering and crying, they capered back into the hillside caves and crannies from which they had come.

And over all Gehenna lay a soft, incomprehensible silence.

A voice moaned beside him.

"At last! I thought it would never be time!"

BRAGGLESTON looked up, amazed to see standing beside him the old man whose boulder rested on the roadway a few rods ahead. Swift panic gripped him. If, after coming so far, this old lunatic's carelessness should rob him of the fruits of his labors—

"Y-your boulder!" he yammered. "Don't leave it like that, you idiot! If it rolls backward—"

The old man stared at him drearily.

"You must be new here."

"So I'm new here!" howled Braggleston. "So what? If your stone rolls back—"

"It won't," sighed the other soul. "Didn't you hear the gong? That's the rest period. Everything stops till the gong strikes again. This is when they feed us, you know. The food is terrible, of course, but when you eat only once every century—"

"Century?" repeated Braggleston.

"But I've been here only a short while."

The old man laughed mirthlessly. "That's what *you* think. Do you know how long it's been since we started from the bottom of this hill?"

"Four hours?" guessed Braggleston,

"Five? Six?"

"Not hours," corrected his companion. "Decades. It's been every bit of forty years."

Then suddenly there were three in their little group. The third party was Petigone, who held in each hand a steaming bowl which he thrust out to the two humans.

"Well, come and get it," he growled.

"I can't stand here like this all eternity. Who in Hell do you two think you are, anyway?"

Hector stared at his bowl suspiciously. Even to a man whose hunger had not been sated for nigh onto a hundred years the contents was not what you might call appetizing. At one period in his Earthly career Braggleston had dabbled in chemistry. Now his nostrils identified the tempting fragrances of such savories as charcoal boiled in blue vitriol, fricasseed anthracite with strychnine sauce, and mashed toadstools in chloroform.

He stared at Pete, then at his repast, then back to the Imp again.

"But-but I can't eat this!" he said wildly.

Pete swished his tail.

"There's no *pleasing* you humans," he growled. "Curse my soul if you're not a nuisance! I wait on you hand and foot, go without dinner myself, and what thanks do I get—?"

"But this is poison!" wailed Braggleston, "deadly poison! It'll kill me!"

"Poppycock! You're already dead, aren't you? He's eating his."

Hector looked at the old soul who, having hastily gobbled his meal, had now equally hastily hurried to the edge of the cliff, where his ancient shoulders were shaking in a series of unmistakable paroxysmic movements.

"*Did* eat it, you mean," said Hector dolefully. "He's upchucking now."

"But of course." There was impatience in Petigone's voice. "He *always* does. *Everybody* always does. But you have to have *some* nourishment, don't you? Well, if you won't eat, it's no fur off *my* tail. I've got to be going."

And he vanished in a little puff of purple light.

BRAGGLESTON turned to his aged companion.

"That's the last straw," he said. "I'm not going to stick around here any longer."

"You can't go till you've finished your punishment."

"Then I'll finish it," said Hector grimly, "and get out of here. You say there's a time-out in the torment during these rest periods?"

The old man nodded. "That's one of the punishments. They let us rest once in a while so the torture will feel worse when it starts again."

"It looks to me," said Hector speculatively, "as if this would be a damn good time to finish rolling these pebbles up the hill. With nothing to bother us—"

His companion stared at him, amazement in his eyes. "I never thought of that. But we *could*, couldn't we?"

"Could," said Hector, "and will. Let's get going!"

The old soul nodded eagerly and hobbled back to his boulder. Both men bent anew to their task.

Braggleston had not realized how many other condemned souls were on the road. Now, as they labored upward in the silence of the rest interval, they came upon not a score or a hundred, but *hundreds*, of resting humans, each of whom at first looked with astonishment upon the newcomers, then listened to Braggleston's explanation with gaping jaw, and finally joined into the strategic maneuver.

Only one of the damned refused to join the cavalcade. Since each successive boulder represented a barrier to the passage of those behind it, Braggleston's rapidly growing army of rebels solved this problem with typical Sheolian dispatch. They chucked the *saboteur* headforemost into a cauldron of simmering lead, and each man moved up one boulder.

Thus it was that the foremost members of the rebel group had already reached the top of the Mount, and Braggleston was but a few short miles

from his goal when the brazen gong gave tongue again. Hell's torpid atmosphere blazed afresh with quivering flame, and the torture of the damned began anew.

Instantly there appeared on the mountainside the horde of imps and demons who had been recessing. They came, they saw, they howled with screaming rage, to see the scores of damned who, during the lull, had attained the supposedly inviolate goal. A jet-black demon, wild of eye, spread massive wings and zoomed off toward some unknown headquarters for instruction. Braggleston, staring apprehensively after that fleeting form, redoubled his efforts and screamed pleading encouragement to those before him.

An instant later the messenger was back, surrounded by a troop of infernal soldiery—or so Hector judged them to be by their gaudy trappings—and these warriors swooped down upon their quarry with vengeful ire.

THE ensuing inquisition was swift, brief, and merciless. Braggleston learned to his chagrin the folly of expecting loyalty from his fellow sufferers. Before the first punitive threats of the demons they quailed, raised accusing fingers and voices in Hector's direction. An instant later two glistening, ebon arch-fiends had dragged Braggleston from behind his boulder and tossed him to his knees before the leader of their demoniac corps.

This worthy, scowling and spreading his sable pinions like a belligerent turkeycock, glared at Hector irately.

"So!" he snarled. "So *you're* the one who started all this! What's the idea, anyway? Don't you know that everything stops during the rest period?"

Hector said, "No one told me to rest. My instructions were to roll the boulder to the top of the Mount—"

"Silence, human!" roared the Demon commander. "You knew what was expected of you! You saw everyone else resting. When in Hell, do as the hellions do!"

He glowered at Hector malevolently, tiny wisps of smoke curling from his distended nostrils. "You look like a new soul; are you?"

"Yes, sir," said Hector meekly.

"Who's your Imp?"

"My—?" Hector remembered. "Oh, you must mean Pete?"

"Petigone? I thought so!" snarled the Demon. "Blast that Imp, anyhow! He's getting as softhearted as Heaven lately! Jezeridah!" He turned to one of his warriors. "Tell Petigone to report to HQ immediately. As for *this* thing, toss it in the dungeons for a few years till the Committee passes judgment on it."

Harsh talons, fiery hot, gripped Braggleston. Jet wings unfolded, and all of flaming Hades lay like a crimson chart beneath him as his grim accusers bore him, howling vain protests, toward the central torment pits of lower Gehenna.

There, some time later, Petigone found him.

The Imp looked far from happy. There were dark bags under his eyes and his tail drooped dismally between his legs. He glared at Braggleston in disgust.

"What the Heaven's the matter with you anyhow!" he demanded. "The minute I turn my back you get both of us into trouble. I wish to badness you'd gone to Paradise!"

Hector looked up at him with a little moan of relief.

"Pete! Thank goodness you're here! Help me get rid of these things." He pawed futilely at the swarm of tiny razor-sharp inch worms which crawled upon him, attracted by the hot tar in

which he had been stewed before being tossed into the dungeon.

"Don't swear at me!" snapped Pete. "As for them—they'll go away as soon as I start flaying you. Damnation!" he broke out pettishly. "I suppose I'll have to rub rock salt into your carcass, too, after I get the skin off. And me with hands as tender as a vampire's kiss!"

"F-flaying?" faltered Braggleston. "R-rock salt?"

"Makes me sick!" grumbled the Imp. "Work, work, work! That's all I do around here. Sometimes I wish I were an angel!"

HE STOPPED short, aghast at his own blasphemy, hastily made the sign of the *crux ansata*, and muttered a litany from the Black Mass.

"Why didn't you rest during the recess period? Sheol knows I'd be glad to rest if I ever get a chance. But do I? No. It's twenty-four hours a day, every day, for years, centuries, millennia—"

Braggleston, staring at him with sudden interest, quite forgot the leach that was striving to imbed itself in his right thigh. "Twenty-four hours a day?"

"And on the double quick, too!" acknowledged Pete gloomily. "New souls to greet, fires to stoke, water to fetch for the boiling kettle, lashings . . . not to mention a six hour trick in that filthy, stinking ghoulish chamber. Sometimes I wonder who's being punished—us Imps or you mortals!"

"Twenty-four . . . hours . . . a day!" repeated Braggleston thoughtfully. He pursed his lips. His eyes clouded shrewdly. He said, "But that's not right, you know."

"You're telling me!" grumbled Pete. "But what's a poor Imp to do? They're His orders. We have to serve two billion years as apprentices before we're

allowed to grow wings and become Demons. Even at that, a Demon's job is no cinch. He's got to make trips to Earth—blesséd cold place, Earth!—and tempt you suckers; he has to foment wars, see that weapons are handy when people get mad, make young girls curious—"

"And what's the payoff?" interrupted Braggleston suddenly.

"Payoff?"

"What do you get out of this two billion years hard labor? And the Demons? What's their minimum wage rate? Do you get overtime? I can see the working conditions are horrible. How about your living conditions? Does your boss—I mean, does *He* see that you're well fed, well housed, well—"

Braggleston had been about to say well-clothed from force of habit; he stopped himself in time.

Petigone was staring at him curiously. "What's all this blessed blather? Talk sense, won't you? Housed? We don't have any homes. Wages? What are wages? Well fed? We eat the same meals you do. And as for sleeping—" He laughed curtly. "We're too busy for that! I haven't had a good night's sleep since the Leviathan broke loose from the South Stygia zoo in 394 A.D. and knocked me unconscious with a slap of its tail."

Braggleston had quite forgotten his physical discomfort now. Such puny torment was completely lost in the flame of wrathful indignation that suffused him. Forgetful of crackling tar and bloated leaches that fell from him with dull, squishy *plops*, he rose, bristling, to confront Petigone.

"It's an outrage! That's what it is!" he roared. "The old story, in Hell as it is on Earth. Class consciousness! Unfair Capital! The down-trodden working man! I'll bet *He*—" He in-

cised the name sharply. "I'll bet *He* doesn't work twenty-four hours a day! I'll bet *He* eats and sleeps well! Now doesn't *He*?"

PETE'S dusky scarlet face paled to a faded salmon. He glanced about him apprehensively; sidled closer to Braggleston. "You mean," he whispered nervously, "Satan?"

Braggleston nodded. "That's who I mean!"

"B-but he's the boss!" said Pete. *He's* not supposed to work. *He* lives in the Palace and takes care of the special events. Like tempting saints, and greeting newly arrived dignitaries. *He*—"

"Say no more!" said Braggleston peremptorily. "The situation is perfectly clear. Exploitation of labor, that's what it is. *He* lives in the Palace. In the lap of luxury, surrounded, no doubt, by a harem of the most voluptuous women in Hades. *He* drinks and dines like a prince, wears the finest of clothes, while you go naked. Exploitation of labor! I've fought it all my life. Now I find it again here. You work that *He* may rest. By the sweat of your horns you keep *Him* in one long, luxurious orgy. It—it's outrageous! What you need—" stormed Braggleston, "What *you* need is a union!"

Pete looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Union?"

"Collective bargaining," shouted Hector. "A minimum wage and hours law. Equal rights for laborers. Time and a half for overtime. Better working conditions, rights of seniority and old age pensions. Tell me, how many of you Imps are there in Hades anyway?"

Petigone scratched his sound horn with one long, scraggle-nailed talon. "Quarter of a million, maybe."

"And the other working classes?"

"Demons," said Petigone. "About a hundred thousand of them. Then there are the ogres, the ghouls, vampires, succubi, a few werewolves, the goblins, trolls, gnomes, witches—"

"How many altogether, would you say?"

"Couple of million, I suppose. Of course, there are the troglodytes, the bolglorbs, and lobbies—"

"Never mind them," said Braggleston. "We're only interested in the skilled labor now. We'll take care of the others later. Look, do you think you could get these fellow workers of yours together at a mass meeting during the next rest period?"

"I-I suppose so," said Pete dubiously. "All but the Demons, maybe. They're inclined to be a little uppity. But I know one or two—Ahazrihman, for instance—"

"Get one or two," said Braggleston grimly, "and we'll soon get the rest. And do you think you could get me out of here to address that meeting?"

Petigone fanged his nether lip. "I could pretend I was taking you to the boiling pits to have your liver scalded."

"Then make the arrangements," commanded Hector. "We've got to get organized. We'll show *Him*! You poor devils have been in a mess of a Hell since the beginning of time. Now there's going to be a New Order—wait a minute! What are you heating that poker for?"

Pete whispered cautiously, "I'll do it, Braggleston! You're absolutely right. But I'm supposed to be in here torturing you. If I don't give you a few licks with the spike, somebody might suspect something—"

Braggleston said, "You've got red paint, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Then why not paint the end of that

poker and just let on you're scorching me? I'll scream, and they'll never know the difference!"

Petigone looked doubtful. "But you'd be avoiding punishment," he said.

"Don't confuse the issue," said Braggleston with simple dignity. "This is for the Cause. I'm willing to make personal sacrifices for the good of the masses. I'll even forego a little desirable torment to sabotage this damnable system that has us in its grip. Lay on, Macduff!" And he bared his breast unflinchingly to the unheated steel.

"Petigone's the name," said Pete. "Well—holler, then, Braggleston."

AND thus in Hades began Hector Braggleston's espousal of the cause which on Earth had interested, supported him, and brought him to an early grave.

So intent did he become on his plan for the recreation of Gehenna that the next century sped by with incredible swiftness. It was no period of great inconvenience to Braggleston. With each new meeting Hector impressed upon the Imp further reasons for the desirability of an Infernal union. Pete's dubiousness faded into acquiescence. Acquiescence gave way to approval. Slow approval blazed finally into violent enthusiasm.

This enthusiasm gave Hector one of the two uncomfortable periods he experienced during the century. He discovered to his dismay that excitement aroused Petigone to a high degree of electrical energy. Pete, waxing wroth, declaiming upon the labor conditions suffered by Imps, began to splutter and fume and emit great static sparks like a leaky condenser. Before their conversation had ended, Hector's hair was scorched, his nerve centers were acrawled with vibrations, and he felt much like a man who had gone to the mat for three

falls with a mobile thunderbolt.

His only other unpleasant interlude occurred when, for a week, Petigone failed to appear to administer the now customary artificial punishment which the duo had agreed upon as a subtle means of showing their contempt for the powers in command.

Pete's duties were taken over by a young and ardent Fury named Jael, whom Braggleston did not as yet dare to make a confidante in the new movement. This Harpy, eager to win her spurs as a full fledged tormentor, devised novelties of punishment so exquisite that Braggleston's torture chamber became one of the noisiest sections in all central Gehenna. Until, that is, the Fury carelessly shriveled Hector's throat and tongue with an overdose of scalding arsenic, temporarily reducing his screams to a choke and bubbling babble.

When Pete finally returned to assume his duties he was confronted with the task of renovating an almost completely disassembled Braggleston. This he did dourly, first refurbishing Hector's oral and auditory apparatus so that as he worked they two could converse, and also that Braggleston might tell him where to look for such missing parts as the Harpy had hidden in private little caches of her own devising.

Petigone had a grievance of his own which he poured into Braggleston's ears as soon as Hector began to bear some recognizable semblance to a human soul.

"You were right, Hec, old boy!" he complained bitterly. "They don't have the slightest consideration for the laboring classes around this joint. You know where I've been for the past week?"

Hector said, "Mo," uncertainly, trying to get his newly repaired tongue once again under control. "No," he said, "Where?"

"Serving as a dock hand," snarled Petigone, "on the Styx River ferry line. Imagine it! *Me*, with more electricity in me than a dry cell battery, working on the waterfront! I blessed near got short circuited a half dozen times. Nobody to talk to but a bunch of green naiads and tritons—and the skipper, old Charon, is the tightest one wraith I ever met in my death. The penny grabbing old scoundrel—"

"Twenty-four hour shift, I suppose," said Braggleston commiseratingly.

"Um-hmm," grunted the Imp. He finished remoulding Hector's fractured vertebrae. "Stand up and see how that feels. *He* was down there."

"So?"

"Yeh. He and Lilith, the brazen hussy. Most disgraceful thing I ever saw. Walking around with *clothes* on, like a—a common churchgoer!"

Braggleston nodded understandingly. "That's the way it always is. The laboring classes do all the work, while the bosses strut at their ease. Well it won't be long now. Arrangements all made?"

Pete nodded. "We're going to meet in the old burning court by Lethe Lake. Nobody lives there but Gilles de Retz, and he's been all alone ever since they canonized that French doll. Got it all planned what you're going to say?"

"All planned," said Braggleston. "It's going to be good, too."

Pete looked at him suspiciously. "What's that! None of that fifth columnist stuff, now!"

"I mean," corrected Hector hastily, "it's going to be *bad*."

WHEN the rest gong groaned, a sense of doubt and panic overwhelmed Braggleston for a moment. Again, as before, the ruddy flames of Hell died down. Mute silence hushed an Abaddon customarily rent by the

shrieks and groans of the damned. There was truce in Hades, and the enormity of what he planned to do appalled him briefly.

Then he noticed that this time Gehenna had not relapsed into utter quietude. As he and Pete slipped from the scalding pit, where the Imp had taken him on the pretext of burning his entrails, he saw that other shapes were gliding furtively toward the ordained meeting place. Gray shapes of ghosts and weirmen; blue, stunted kobalds; green gnarly trolls; the scarlet hues of succubi and imps—all were gathering to hear Braggleston's exposition of the New Order.

His courage almost failed him when he mounted the platform beside Petigone and a swarthy, blue-bearded soul garbed insufficiently in a necklace formed of infant skulls, to look down upon his audience. Then the bluebeard, whom Petigone introduced as Gilles de Retz, greeted him enthusiastically. Petigone announced him to the waiting throng as "that fine, damned friend of every haunt in Hades," the assembled throng gibbered its approval—and Braggleston's nervousness slipped from him like epidermis under the scalpel.

He quite forgot the monstrous visages confronting him; this audience was one with a thousand such he had addressed during his Earthly life. A sense of purpose stirred strongly in his veins, indignation brought to his lips the ready words of rally, and with no further ado he plunged into his argument.

From the very beginning he felt he was addressing a receptive audience. When he spoke of wages, explaining the inherent right of every demon, drab, and devil to a substantial income, rumbles of approval rose from the listening congregation. At his mention of decent working hours—"Forty hours a week, with one decade paid vacation every

millennium!"—a shrill scream of approbation slipped from the throat of a weary looking banshee in the front row. When, growing bolder, he pointed the deliberate finger of accusation at the greedy Master of this Infernal enterprise, boldly accused Satan of enslaving His cohorts to gain his own luxurious desires, and demanding that the Master Demon grant His underlings the right of collective bargaining, frenzy gripped the mob. Wild yells rent the sultry air of Hades. Demons and ghouls alike roared wild approbation. Grim ogres rumbled throaty agreement. And a granite-voiced basilisk so far forgot his demoniac dignity as to lumber forward and pound Braggleston's shoulder with clavical-crushing enthusiasm.

It was a dour undine who raised the question Braggleston had been expecting. "This is all very well," she wheezed squishily, "but how are we going to attain these ends that you speak of?"

"We strike!" declared Braggleston. "Who controls the fires of Hell? We do! Who guards the rivers and bays and harbors? We do! Does *He* ever lift *His* hand to help with the actual punishment, the tortures, the temptations? No! We do all the work! *We* are the true masters of Hades! *He* must be made to understand that!"

"But the damned—" persisted the undine.

"We'll walk out on strike, and to Heaven with the damned!" shouted Hector recklessly. "Nothing will bring *Him* to heel faster than to see humans enjoying themselves. The laughter of the damned is our strongest weapon."

A jet black demon flapped forward from the edge of the throng. "I think you've got something there, man," he assented. "*He* can't take care of all the duties of Hell by *Himself*. And the labor situation here *is* hellish. Why, I haven't

had leisure time for a good orgy since I sprouted my pinfeathers. But—" And he stared out over the assemblage superciliously, "but you can't expect us demons to mingle with such common fiends as—"

"That has all been arranged," interrupted Hector suavely. "There need be no intermingling of the castes of Hades. Each group will have its own branch union. Each will be represented in the common council. I myself—" he smiled modestly, "—stand willing to assume the duties of secretary of the Board of Associated Devils until we have our objective. And—er—Treasurer, too, of course. There's the small matter of dues to be considered."

"Dues?" repeated Petigone worriedly. "But there is no currency in Hell, Brag, old boy!"

"Then we must print some," said Braggleston firmly. "My badness, you can't have increased wages without some medium of exchange. We'll make it a credit allotment system based on work units. Ten sins make one crime . . . ten crimes make one dollar." He added thoughtfully, "There must be printers in Hell."

Petigone chuckled. "Millions of them. Printers, publishers, editors—"

"We'll engrave *His* likeness on the one dollar bill," said Braggleston. "And Lilith's on the five. *He* ought to like that." He turned to the assemblage. "Well, that'll be all for now. Organization meetings for the various branch locals will be called as soon as possible. Meanwhile, spread the word to your fiends and associates. Now get back to your dungeons and furnaces and wait for The Day."

EVEN in his wildest dreams Braggleston had not dared hope for such startling growth as his plan enjoyed. News of the projected union spread

through Hades like wildfire. Braggleston's dungeon became the meeting ground for conspirators from Upper Abaddon to Lower Sheol, from Avernus in the east to far western Stygia.

Since his jailers numbered among the first converts, Hector enjoyed liberties unprecedented to a human soul in Hades. Not only were his torments reduced to a mere symbolic bi-weekly parboiling, but he was showered with luxuries unknown to any save the highest caste of arch-fiends. A mattress of down was substituted for that of nettles on which he had formerly slept. He was permitted the use of unguents after his torture periods, and a thoughtful jailer provided him with a pair of asbestos slippers to wear when he took his daily constitutional through the charcoal pits. The meals still left much to be desired, but that was to be expected. Until the B.A.D. won its demands there could be little improvement in the infernal cuisine. But Braggleston noticed gratefully that the prison cook used a soft bituminous rather than hard anthracite in his victuals, and that the sulphuric sauce had been so diluted as to make it almost palatable.

Meanwhile the organization of the branch locals continued apace. Pete brought gleeful daily reports of growth in the ranks of their adherents. The ogres, serpents, and vampires were first to organize. They were followed almost immediately by the imps, witches, and succubi. There was a little trouble with Branch 113, Associated Wraiths and Ghosts. Since the intended members had varying periods of visibility, they experienced some difficulty in getting together a quorum. But Braggleston proved his leadership ability by appointing a member of the Magicians and Sorcerers Local No. 4 to attend the wraiths' meeting. The necromancer brought with him sufficient ectoplasm to

embody all would-be members.

Only one small complication disturbed Hector's complete happiness. His one-time tormentor, Jael, had now ardently espoused the Union cause, but the Harpy had not stopped there. Not satisfied to ally herself with Braggleston as a leader, she had, embarrassingly, developed a yen for Braggleston the *man*.

Braggleston, not wanting to offend any adherent of the Cause, at first endured her extravagant endearments without complaint. But when sighs and langorous glances gave way to fondlings and caresses, Braggleston was forced to call a halt. The ardent Fury apparently did not realize that when she hugged Hector her razor-sharp talons had an annoying habit of digging great furrows in his back, or that her beak was more adequately formed for rending carcasses than osculation.

Gently, but firmly, he tried to point out to her that in the life of a busy man there is little time for the tender aspects of romance. She did not take her dismissal well. She took it, as a matter of fact, very poorly. Her farewell embrace punctured Braggleston's jugular vein and cut his throat from ear to ear. Had it not been for Petigone's deft ministrations, Braggleston would have been quite unable to address the meeting of the newly formed Goblins' Local.

"I was afraid of that Harpy from the beginning," Pete said direly as he pumped fresh blood into Braggleston's jaded veins. "Where did she go after she left here?"

Braggleston shook his head. "She didn't say."

"She'll do us mischief," foreboded Pete. "You know the old saying: 'Hell hath no woman like a Fury scorned.' She might even go to *Him*."

"Let her," said Braggleston grimly. "*He'll* find out soon, anyway."

Pete looked at him eagerly. "You mean—?"

"Exactly," nodded Braggleston. "I'm passing out notices tonight. We strike at the beginning of the next recess."

PETIGONE'S fears were well founded. The blow fell the next day, shortly after Braggleston had returned from an inspection of the new currency which would become Gehenna's medium of exchange, and shortly before the ringing of the recess gong.

There came the rush of mighty wings outside his dungeon. Braggleston heard his gaoler's voice crying frightened protests, cloven hooves pounded on baked clay floors, and the door of his prison burst open. Before him, gigantic, majestic, blazingly accoutred in the regalia of the Royal Guard, stood a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Arch-demons. His wings were stiff with rage, and his eyes flamed smokily.

"You're Hector Braggleston?" he bellowed. "Come!"

Petigone gasped and tried to merge inconspicuously with the dull-red glowing steel of the dungeon wall. But in vain. The Corps Commander glared at him vituperatively.

"And you, Petigone! Remain here until further orders! His Majesty has heard some curious reports about you. All right! Bring him!"

Braggleston had only time to shout, "Don't forget, Pete! When the recess gong strikes—!"

Then, as once before, he was gripped by mighty talons, whisked into the air, and borne dizzily across the crimson checkerboard of Hell.

This time, however, no dungeon awaited him. His captors set him down before the massive ebony building which was the Palace of his Infernal Majesty, Satan of Hades.

Up the broad steps they led him, and

into a hall so gigantic that it dwarfed into insignificance even their mighty frames, shriveling Braggleston with a sense of awe. Into a throne room, all jet and flaming scarlet, and up to a monstrous throne upon which sat—

"Satan!"

The Host looked at his warriors. "Leave us!" he commanded. Instantly they vanished in a dozen little puffs of scarlet flame. The Archfiend turned a level, curious gaze on Braggleston. "Come closer, Hector Braggleston. I've been hearing strange rumors about you. I want to see what type of man dares defy the Master of Tophet."

Hector moved forward, trembling. But as he did so he noted a curious thing. With each succeeding step toward the throne, the great room seemed to dwindle. The ceiling appeared to lower, and the walls to close in upon him. The parquetry beneath his feet was no longer a vague and incomprehensible design, but took form and semblance and meaning. Likewise, the Host toward whom he moved seemed to grow lesser in stature, until by the time Hector stood before him, Satan no longer towered like an ebony mount, but was a creature of Braggleston's own height.

And Braggleston saw that Satan, thus reduced, was really not so frightful after all. He was, in fact, a Devil somewhat on the scrawny side. The lines that scored his cheek and brow were not so much the harsh lines of outraged majesty as they were furrows of perplexed anxiety. When the Host spoke again, his voice was not the rolling of thunders, but was sharp with fretful querulousness.

"Now just what is this, Braggleston?" he complained. "Aren't you content to let Hell enough alone? What's all this nonsense about strikes and Unions—"

Braggleston realized suddenly that the scene had become familiar to him. This was a little playlet in which he had enacted his rôle many times before. His timidity fled. His shoulders straightened, and bluff assertiveness swept the terror from his eyes.

"This is no nonsense, Your Majesty," he retorted. "We mean business."

"We?" Satan swished his tail impatiently. "Who do you mean, 'we'?"

"I speak," said Hector with rapidly swelling assurance, "for the one million members of the B.A.D.—the Benevolent Association of Demons—with more than 13,000 paid-up local chapters. The laboring demons of Hades are tired of being exploited. In vain they have approached you—"

Satan said, "Now, wait a minute! Nobody's ever approached me—"

"In vain," continued Braggleston blandly, "they have approached you with pleas to relieve their hideously foul and unfair working conditions. You have turned a deaf ear to their entreaties. Therefore, at the stroke of the gong a few moments hence, labor will take matters into its own hands."

A spark of the old devil flickered murkily in Satan's eyes. He bridled.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't we, though?" laughed Braggleston. "Well, you'll see, Your Majesty. When the gong strikes—and there it goes now! *Now* you'll see!"

It was as though his words were a signal, an order, a command. For with the dimly heard groaning of the recess gong, for the briefest fraction of an instant there settled over Hades the accustomed hush. Then the hush was supplanted by strange and furtive stirrings that seemed to gather and close in from every quarter of Gehenna. These stirring coalesced, became part of one coherent, meaningful sound, a sound which translated itself into the

cries of demoniac voices. The tramp of marching feet. Satan's scarlet face sallowed to a dull faded rose.

"W-what—?" he stammered.

"Come to the window," bade Braggleston complacently, "and see for yourself."

HE HAD reason to be proud in that moment. And to be thankful, too, that Petigone, remaining at liberty, had so perfectly carried out his instructions. For it was an impressive sight that greeted his eyes and those of the Overlord of Hades as they stepped to the window.

Into the great courtyard of the Palace, from every quarter of Sheol, were marching flapping, squirming, hobbling, the multifold organized spectres of Hell. Grim-visaged and stern as only roused devils can be, more than a half million strong, they swept the addled palace-guards from their way and formed a solid wall of protest before His Majesty's castle.

Here, from the flame pits of West Abaddon, were a host of fire-imps and salamanders, staunchly gathered beneath their new crest—*crimson a fesse sable, and thereon two charred sinners rampant parted athwart silver and gules*. Overhead wheeled in close battle formation six companies of winged demons. The moat beyond the castle was aswarm with undines, naiads, and tritons bearing proudly aloft a challenging placard—"Drown with Capital; Sup with Labor!" Elsewhere platoons of ghouls and vampires, trolls, succubi and lobbies banded firmly in demand of their Infernal rights.

Petigone had done well, Braggleston thought with approval. Even the unskilled laborers had been converted to the Cause . . . the ogres, nighthags, and tremens. A rustling swarm of serpents had slithered up a Tree of For-

bidden Fruit in the courtyard, and from that vantage point had broken loose a banner that proclaimed, "Better Living Conditions for Serpents! We Haven't Got a Pit to Hiss In!"

Stunned, Satan turned to Braggleston. "W-why—" he stammered, "they mean business!"

"You're blessed right they mean business," gloated Braggleston. "This is the showdown, Lucifer. These party members represent more than ninety percent of the working class of Hades. They have their instructions and they know their rights at last. If here and now you don't agree to the terms which as their Secretary-Treasurer I am empowered to lay before you, every devil in Hades will lay down his implements of torture. There'll be no more suffering in Hades until—Hell freezes over!"

Mephistopheles' eyes were fiery beads of rage.

"You can't do this to me, Braggleston!" he screamed. "I'm the Master Demon! The Master Sorcerer! I'll destroy you—"

"I," pointed out Braggleston reasonably, "am already dead."

"Then I'll have you tortured till your corpuscles scream for mercy!" raged the Archfiend. "With red hot pincers and boiling lead—"

"And who," demanded Hector coolly, "will carry out your orders? It's no go, Nick. You've had your last say-so around here. There's a New Order in Hades, and you might as well get used to it. These poor devils have their rights, and by the Seven Cardinal Sins, they're going to get them."

LUCIFER'S ire dissipated. He seemed to shrink in upon himself like the walls of a pricked balloon. His eyes were haunted. He said weakly, "And—and what are these terms?"

"A currency system," enumerated Braggleston, "so the laborers will always have higher wages to strike for. Immediate embarkment on an Infernal Housing Project, so the devils will have better living conditions. Enactment of a Wage-Hours law, establishment of priority and seniority rights for laborers, Committee representation in the operation of Gehenna, and better food—*much* better food—"

His Majesty shuddered violently. "Those are harsh terms, Braggleston."

"They're fair terms," declaimed Braggleston. Having won his point he could afford to be magnanimous. He adopted a reasonable tone. "Stop groaning, Your Majesty, and take a sensible view of this. Can't you see it's all for the best? You've had a blazes of a situation here for Heaven knows how many thousand years. You've ruled the roost as you saw fit—and where has it got you? Have you been to Earth recently?"

"Berchtesgarden," acknowledged Satan, "and the Palazzo Venezia. I didn't really travel much—"

"You couldn't tell much from *those* visits—but surely you know what humans think of Gehenna? They think it's a hell of a place!"

"Look, Lucifer, you're running a competitive establishment. How do you expect to get people to come to your part of the Afterworld if it isn't even operated on a sound business basis? You don't appeal to the better classes. Paradise gets all the intelligent men; you get only the weaklings, the hypocrites, and a very few enthusiastically wholehearted sinners—" Braggleston flushed modestly, "—like myself."

"But once the word gets around that Hades will protect the working man, business will boom down here until the angels break their harps in envy. You'd

like that, wouldn't you?"

Satan stared at him speculatively. Dawning conviction gathered in his eyes. He whispered, "You really think—?"

"I don't think," declared Braggleston. "I *know*! I'm a fair man, Your Majesty. Give my boys what they want and I'll play along with you. I'll even forego the pleasures of personal torment for a few millenia or so, till we get this thing operating smoothly. After that—"

BUT Lucifer interrupted him with a sudden gesture. The Arch-fiend had decided. He brushed past Braggleston and stepped to the window. Braggleston was awed to notice that as he did so, once again he seemed to grow in stature. There was a reversal of that strange dwindling which had previously contracted the room. Now the walls and ceilings seemed to rush away from him, and he was a tiny mote of humanity lost in tremendous distances.

Lucifer grew. And as he grew his body took on substance, power, dignity. When he addressed his cohorts, gathered in the courtyard beneath him, his voice was a mighty tumult.

"Fiends," he cried. "Fiends, helions, countrymen—lend me your ears! We, Mephisto Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, Lord of all Sheolia, have listened to your pleas and decided to grant your desires. From this moment forward there will be a New Order in Hades. Our fatherland will be streamlined in accordance with—er—latest business practices. And—"

He laid a steaming claw on Braggleston's shoulder. "Before he leaves us, we wish to publicly offer our most Infernal thanks to the erstwhile citizen who made these reforms possible. Hector Braggleston—"

His invitation was a command.

Braggleston stepped forward. But there was swift anxiety mingled with his pride. "L-leave, Your Majesty?" he stammered. "Erstwhile?"

Lucifer ignored him. "And to his lieutenant, the Imp, Petigone, we also offer our thanks," he said. "And our august assurance that the good work they have so nobly begun will be carried on in accordance with their plans."

A tremendous cheer, rising from the throats of the assembled devils, rocked the very pillars of Gehenna. Off in the distance the recess gong clamored an end to the rest period. Its brazen clash, thought Braggleston, symbolized the opening of a new epoch. The din was frightful, but through it he heard the Host's voice calling him once again.

"Braggleston," called Lucifer gently. "Petigone."

They stood side by side before him. There was warm friendliness in Lucifer's eyes and—or was Braggleston mistaken?—just the faintest suggestion of demoniac amusement.

"We are grieved," said Mephistopheles suavely, "that it is impossible for you to enjoy the fruits of your labors. But thus are afterworld affairs ordained. We bid you the joy of your new surroundings. And give you Our sad farewell."

"F-farewell!" cried Braggleston in agony. "But we're not going anywhere. Pete!"

Then a tremendous crash rocked his senses. Hades reeled and staggered before his gaze, disappeared in a sheen of blinding, ultra-violet flame. His senses trembled before a staggering shock that thrust him, whirling, hurtling, into unfathomable heights. Crimson, then flickering gray, then finally thin soft wisps of cerulean blue . . . and off in the distance a sheen of gold. Of gold mingled with pearl and amber and amethyst.

HECTOR stared about him, dismayed. There were soft, pink clouds beneath his feet. The sharp, sulphurous stench of Hades no longer burned his nostrils. In its place—he sneezed violently, lungs atingle with the cloying sweetness of incense.

Petigone, beside him, moaned. The Imp was no longer scarlet. He had blanched to a pearly white. Braggleston saw, now, that Pete's horns had vanished from his forehead and that gently askew over his left eye was a dimly glowing miniature halo. And there were tiny pinfeathers sprouting from his shoulder blades . . .

Braggleston's voice was hoarse. "Pete! W-what's happened? Where are we?"

Pete groaned furiously. "Oh, *bless* you, Braggleston! I should have known better than to listen to you. See what you've done? And I had a date tonight with the hottest little sorceress in Lethel!"

Braggleston heard, then, the chant of soft hosannahs in the distance, saw, as in a frightful dream, the throng moving forward to meet them down a golden path that led from the pearly gates.

And he choked, "Heaven! Paradise!"

"Exactly!" assented Pete glumly. "Don't you understand? By creating that blessed Union you did the one thing in eternity that could have remitted your sins. You brought happiness to your fellow humans! And I, like a fool, followed your example and brought happiness to my fellow Imps. So we're kicked out of Hades on our ears! Doomed for eternity to dwell up here. There's no room in Hell for creatures who do *good*!"

Braggleston moaned, and vainly tried to disengage from his hand the shining harp which had miraculously appeared there. He cried,

"But—but I don't *want* to be here, Pete! Everybody's happy here. Everybody's contented. There's no dissension, strife, or discontent—" A sudden thought struck him. "*He* knew this all the time, Pete! *He* did this on purpose. It's his way of punishing us for what we did. Why, he knows there can be no happiness for a labor organizer in Heaven!"

And Petigone nodded.

"That," he mourned, "is the Hell of it, Braggleston!"

TO THE AID OF AUSTRALIA

TODAY we are sending our soldiers to help protect Australia, but several years ago we sent only a tiny moth to prevent Australia from becoming a huge desert.

About fifty years ago, a few prickly pear plants were sent from North America to Australia to be used as ornamental decorations for Australian flower gardens. The prickly pear, a species of cactus, is found throughout the warmer regions of the Americas and is also used to decorate gardens. But in Australia, the prickly pear ran wild; it started to grow in every direction and was destroying a million acres of farm land a year.

The Australian government tried every means available to check its growth—even liquid fire—but with no success. In about thirty years, the plant covered more than 60,000,000 acres in

Queensland and New South Wales, most of which had been good grazing and farming land.

Australian entomologists spent years traveling up and down the Americas in search of an insect which could destroy the plant. They found some insects whose larvae would eat the prickly pear, but did not destroy it completely. Just as their mission seemed hopeless, a new faith was raised by a small Argentine moth. It was the only insect whose life habits made it fit to destroy the cactus which was laying Australia in waste.

The moth was quickly taken to Australia and colonies were placed wherever the prickly pear could be found. Within two years the moths were destroying the cactus and today, almost all of the land that had been overrun by the plant has been reclaimed and turned into farms.

CORPORAL WEBBER'S LAST STAND

by LEROY YERXA

*Webber didn't want to kill, even if it was war, so
he decided that if he died, he'd escape that duty!*

LIEUTENANT SAM RICHARDS pushed the flimsy bamboo door open and strode in. The rain blew after him, drenching the tall trench coated figure. He ripped the stub of cigar from heavy lips and shook like an angry dog.

"Holy smoke," Sam muttered, "It's raining solid outside."

Walt Hubberd, slim, mustached and very tired, looked up over the stack of batteries from the communication set. He smiled, eyes twinkling from under heavy brows, and wiped water from his face.

"Yeah," he looked up at the roof. "They sure left these shacks well ventilated."

Ducking down again, he slipped his headphones on. Richards took off his coat and tossed it in the corner.

"Webber's at it again," he announced.

Hubberd's eyes narrowed to angry green slits.

"Sam," he measured the words in a low, tense voice, "I know you're the superior officer, king bee of the platoon and all that, but sometimes I can't figure you out. Why do you keep sticking up for that guy?"

Richards looked stern, trying to hide his fatigue. With the whole army south of him now, Balanga to be held until

Bataan could be cleared of armed men, it was up to him and the platoon to hold the gully and two ridges until hell cracked. He grinned crookedly. Nine men and two guns left against two, maybe three hundred Japs.

"Come here, Walt." He spread the badly folded map out before him. Hubberd took off the earphones slowly.



Lieutenant Richards stared down
into the foxhole, eyes popping.
That machine gun was firing itself!



They bent over the map and for the hundredth time tried to find a loop-hole. Richards' finger traced the small gully from the north, indicating the two gun pits at the south lip.

"They have to come through the hole," he said quietly. "As long as we can cover that spot with a cross fire, they'll stay in their own little rat trap. The question is, how long can we keep their big guns from finding our positions?"

Hubberd shook his head.

"Looks to me as though they'll go through that hole like water through the dike inside of twenty-four hours."

Over the hill the two Brownings cut loose, rattling lead across the gully edge. Richards stood up, his lips tight on his cigarette.

"Nine men left," he muttered. "And now Webber's trying to turn them against me."

"WHAT?" Hubberd's eyes darkened with fury. "Why that dirty—!"

Richards lifted a hand commandingly.

"Stow it," he grunted. "I can't be sure what's making him tick yet. This morning he made his gunner hold fire until almost twenty Japs managed to sneak through. They're headed south right now to snipe at the main body."

"That scum," Hubberd stood up, hands clenched behind him. "I'd like to drag him in here and wring his neck."

"So would I," Richards folded the map quickly, stuffing it into the inside pocket. "But I can't be sure. Walt—I think the poor kid's going batty. He's been crying all day about hating to shoot human beings; that it isn't right."

"They aren't human," Hubberd ground out. "Remember what they did up north last week?"

Richards nodded.

"Sliced the ears of one of my men and staked him on top of an ant hill."

"Why can't Webber see that! We're in the right in this war. We gotta kill them dirty snakes!"

"Maybe he will see it, before long . . ."

"Hell, I doubt it! He's just plain yellow!"

SOMEONE was stumbling and sliding through the mud from the hill behind the shanty. Hubberd's head jerked forward, and the heavy service pistol came out. The door rattled under a heavy fist.

"Come in."

It was Edwards, first gunner in Webber's pit. He came in half drowned and swaying a little as he walked. His face had every emotion washed out of it, as though he wanted to vomit.

"Webber!" he leaned on the table, gripping it tightly. "The damned fool has killed himself."

Richards slumped back, pushing the dented helmet from his rough, sandy hair. Hubberd stopped pacing and stood very still by the door.

"Nine men left and Webber commits suicide! I told you he was yellow!"

Richards stared at the gunner, lips drawn out straight and hard.

"How did it happen?"

Edwards sat down, rocking his head in his arms.

"I was on the gun," he said slowly. "Webber told me to hold my fire, like this morning. I knew number two pit was firing hell bent for election and expected me to alternate. The Yellow Bellies were going over the gully lip every time he stopped firing. I cut loose and Corporal Webber commanded me to cease firing. I kept right on giving them hell, and he started sobbing like a baby."

"You can't kill those men," he kept shouting. "They got families like us."

"I shut my mouth and kept on alternating every twenty rounds. After a while they stopped crawling out of the rat trap, and I let the gun cool down. I looked at Webber. He was sitting in the mud, tears streaming down his cheeks. Honest to God, Lieutenant Richards, sir, the Corporal was playing with empty cartridge shells. He played like a kid with blocks, making little piles of them and sobbing like hell all the while."

He stopped talking and brought out a filthy cloth. He blew his nose loudly.

Hubberd hadn't moved from his spot by the door. He was staring queerly at Richards.

"Go on," Sam said. "What then?"

Edwards gulped.

"When the Yellow Bellies went through again I started a cross fire. This time Webber stood up with his arms over his head and howled like a sick dog. I didn't see him do it, but he must have scrambled out of the pit and around in front of the gun. Before I could hold fire he got a salvo in the knees and fell right in my face—" he almost broke down. "It was awful—awful."

The lieutenant stood up. He clutched the coat and pulled it on stiffly. Bending over Edwards, he gripped the gunner's shoulder.

"Come on," he said. "We're going back to the gun."

NUMBER ONE gun pit was boiling lead. They reached it through the shallow trench. Assistant gunner, Brown and the platoon's skinny truck driver, Slim, fed the 30-caliber Browning all the lead it could gulp. Sure that both guns were still in action, Richards turned toward the bloody mess in the far side of the pit.

Corporal Webber had died hard. His knees were broken and shredded

with a line of slugs straight up the belly and over his head when he pitched forward.

"Slim," Richards growled. The truck driver came forward.

"Yes, sir!"

"Take him back over the hill and cover him up."

He watched Edwards take his place again behind the heavy barrel of the Browning. Turning to leave, he kicked something in the center of the pit. Stacked neatly in little pyramids of ten, the small row of empty cartridges stared up at him. For a second, compassion softened Richards' muddy, scarred face. Then he kicked at them savagely, trampling them into the mud. What if Webber *was* right, and killing of any kind was wrong?

Edwards' finger tipped lightly against the trigger, sending a salvo of lead across the field. The gun across the ravine answered him.

With a strange gleam in his eye Richards went back along the trench to the safety of the hill. His face was blanked of emotion. The rain had stopped, leaving broad leaves to drip—and down across the hill a brightly plummaged bird flashed against the wet green. Both guns ceased firing and a fiery lopsided sun came out for a while, sinking into the brush-land toward the west.

SOMETIME after midnight Lieutenant Sam Richards came up on one elbow off the hard floor. Guns were clattering to the north. Rattle—stop—rattle. Jap machine guns coming in close. Branches ripped off the trees atop the hill. He got into his coat and went outside.

The bamboo hut went white and clear against a dazzling light in the sky. CRUMP. The sulky, earth-ripping trench mortars were tearing holes

somewhere near his gun positions.

He ran, head down toward the lip of the gully and number two gun. Edwards and Slim would take care of themselves. CRUMP. The way those mortars were raising hell, there would be plenty of Japs in the gully in a few minutes. He crossed the gully edge, and snaking across it studied the land to the north. No movement yet. On again, he pitched face down in a fox hole, the tree above him tearing itself apart under a shower of lead. Belly pressed into the mud he almost fell into number two pit.

Two men alive, two more faces up, lying against the side of the hole. Tanner, number one gunner, saw him, and crawled out from under the trigger. His face was twisted and filthy with grease and smoke.

"If you'll take over for a while, sir?"

Far to the north, big guns started to rumble. 105 mm howitzer shells ripped into the gully, shaking the ground as they dug in. They were cleaning up for the advance.

Sighting down the barrel, Richards felt the water jacket lovingly and lined the Browning over the stake driven outside the pit. His assistant jammed in a new cartridge belt. Richards pulled the trigger back and felt them engage. Before he could see the Yellow Bellies, he opened up. The trigger came back almost gently and the front of the pit blued with smoke and dirt. Edwards heard the salvo from number two, and cut loose with his reply.

SOMEWHERE out front Richards thought he heard an outcry. The howitzers stopped and he felt rather than saw the long line of creeping Japs in the gully.

The first belt was empty. Another rammed into place and again the trigger tripped back. Behind him he

heard the CRUMP of a mortar shell. They were creeping up. Finding the range. On the other side he knew Edwards was in the same spot.

CRUMP. Richards jerked forward, felt the rough shower of flying mud and knew something hit his helmet with a jarring shock. He shook his head, felt the cartridge belt feed out again and turned. The pit was half filled with debris. His men were buried alive under it. Dropping the pistol grip he started to dig savagely with bare hands. They came out of the soft soil, dripping red.

The gun across the gully stopped abruptly. He grabbed like a crazy man for the half buried ammunition box, and waited for Edwards to start firing again. There was another burst of fire from number one pit. Breathing easier he answered with his own gun.

A terrific explosion ripped at the sky across the ravine. For fifty feet on all sides of number one gun, the earth went up, heaving trees and mud in all directions. Sam groaned. He'd have to fight alone. He tried to drag the heavy Browning back. The mortars had almost got his range. He felt a twinge of pain in his knee and sank back swearing. The bastards had broken his knee cap.

The bloody hand went back to the pistol grip. His lips were dry and tasteless. He kicked the gun over. The night was suddenly very silent.

"What the hell's the use!" he thought out loud, trying to pull his game leg out more comfortably.

Voices sounded, smooth and oily in the gully. They were going through it by the dozen. Through to the south where they'd flank the whole damned army unmolested. But maybe their cause was right . . .

His knee hurt like hell.

Then the death rattling of number one gun broke loose from across the ravine. Its sudden clatter brought him upright, and he pitched forward against the side of the hole. The knee was forgotten. This time he knew there were screams. Howling, slobbering Sons of Heaven were dying. Japs—yellow-bellied Japs were falling and dying out there on top of the ravine.

RICHARDS looked over the edge of the pit, eyes wide with amazement. The first gun was running wide open, spitting out compressed hell. The main Jap movement had already left the ravine and were concentrated in the open field to the south.

He had thought the howitzer shell had blasted number one pit from the map. Common sense told Lieutenant Richards that a Browning only fired two hundred-fifty rounds without reloading. Still the gun didn't hesitate. It was stacking Yellow Bellies up like red chips, rattling on and on like an angry hornet.

Forgetting his own safety, Richards went up on one elbow and lifted his helmet into the air. He waved it wildly, the powerful, seamed face lighting up. "Give it to 'em, you tough hided son of a —!!!"

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the gun was silent again. Only the groaning of dying men disturbed the night. He listened carefully for a long time, as they who were left went back along the gully toward the north. Then he started crawling painfully toward the first gun. There was something here that Lieutenant Sam Richards couldn't figure out. Something that—!

He reached the gully, lowered his game leg over the edge and dropped silently down. Up the opposite bank,

he crawled slowly, pulling most of his weight with his strong arms. Then he realized what the howitzer shell had done to the first gun pit.

It wasn't there. At first he looked for the gun. Where the pit had been there was nothing but a deep, ragged edged scar. A spewed up, broken tree leaned over it at a crazy angle. Edwards' body, blanketed with mud, lay face down on the lip of the shell hole.

Richards' knee was giving him trouble again.

The solitary tripod was all that remained of the Browning. Rolling over painfully he reached out and grasped one of its legs in his hand. As though waiting for the safety of silence, the moon slithered between heavy cloud banks and flashed broken streamers of quick-silver across the open pit. Something glinted in the dirt beside him. Richards' face turned stark white, frozen with holy fear.

His hand went out, reverence in the touch, as his fingers fell on a precisely stacked pyramid of empty cartridges. They were in a neat row, exactly like the ones Corporal Webber had played with before he went down under the Browning's ripping hell. Slowly his hand came away, and he slipped one of the shells into his pocket.

"I *knew* you weren't a coward, Webber," he whispered. "Where you are, things are plainer to see. Folks have a better idea of what's right and wrong. And I'll give the boys your message, Corporal. I'll show 'em this cartridge and tell 'em where I found it. And I'll tell 'em how you came back to do the right thing when you saw it. I'll tell 'em, because *knowing* you're doing the right thing makes it easier to do. And you oughta know, Corporal Webber!"

DOUBLE TROUBLE FOR OSCAR

by JAMES NORMAN

Oscar couldn't be in two places at once, and yet . . . Anyway, it meant danger to Fort Knox's gold



FOR the news-photo men it was a big assignment. They shot it from every angle: trick shots of celebrities stepping out of fine limousines; angle shots of military men and statesmen. Cameras clicked at the small, alert army of Secret Service men guarding the entrances and windows. In the checkroom they even aimed cameras at the rows of shiny silk top hats—toppers which covered the most important heads in Washington.

Bill Pine, the lanky, energetic *World* photographer grinned as his lively eyes swept the long reception room. "Boyl! A bomb under here and you'd blow up the whole Allied Nations Board of Strategy," he exclaimed.

"Not with me around," I answered confidently.

I'm Oscar, the Martian Detective. That is why I answered Bill Pine with such confidence. I'm no detective in the ordinary sense. Since coming to this planet, I've been glorified—like



"I'll take those papers," said Oscar

Wimpy—and that is why the newspaper men hung around me during this elite reception which followed one of the most important meetings of the Allied Nations' Board of Strategy.

Newsmen like Bill Pine knew that if any trouble occurred, I'd be in on it instantly. It's because of my nose. But I'll explain about that later. Men like Pine also know that I make good copy, trouble or no trouble. You see, a Martian detective is enough to provide contrasting relief for people who have read too much about impossible eight-legged, saber-tooth planetary monsters or have seen too much of detectives looking like the Thin Man.

I'm not at all thin, but when I pull myself up to my full height of four feet five inches I'm really a dapper little fellow. My legs are quite stubby and I'm said to resemble a penguin, being a bit wide at the bottom. I've got ordinary hands though, and skin tougher and more porous than yours—bullet proof, in fact.

Here, at this Washington gathering, it was really my nose that kept the newspapermen around. It is kind of tulip-shaped, with a flare at the end, something like a public address system loudspeaker. When there is trouble in the air, it twitches.

Bill Pine was watching the crowd and color in the elaborate room. His gaze had wandered toward the far alcove where my companion, Hodar the Magician, was preparing an informal show of legerdemain. Hodar had just pulled back his sleeves and was showing a coin to Secretary of Treasury Frazier and to a smoothly beautiful dark-haired girl at his side.

It was then my nose began fluttering. I sensed an atmosphere of impending danger and my nerves grew taut, prepared. "Pine!" I said abruptly. "Let's move. Something is wrong."

My sensitive nose had located the danger zone as being near Hodar. Pine and I headed toward the alcove, pushing past the countless numbers of people gathered in the reception room. As we neared the alcove I caught a glimpse of Hodar waving his hand, signaling someone near the light buttons on the wall. Abruptly, the alcove lights blinked out.

A SECOND later they flashed on again and I heard a scream. What followed, seemed packed in an instant of time. Secretary of Treasury Frazier rocked slightly on his heels, staring in my direction queerly. Then he collapsed. I noticed the look of horror which swept Hodar's face and saw the dark-haired girl drop to Frazier's side.

"Pine," I shouted. "Close off the alcove doors. 'Get one of the Government men in. Quick.'"

"Where's Doc Wingate?" I heard Hodar call.

An elderly man with very abrupt, almost military mannerisms, shoved in past Bill Pine. He was Dr. Wingate at whose apartment Hodar and I were staying in Washington. He was followed by a Government man.

The Government man drew the girl away from Frazier's limp body. "All right, Miss Frazier," he murmured.

Wingate stooped over the body for a moment, then looked up, shaking his head.

"Dead," he said. "Bullet entered from the back, struck the spinal column, shattering the nerve system." He stared sternly at the news photographer, Pine. "You'd better arrest that man," he said abruptly.

"Me?" Pine gasped.

The dark-haired girl, Lana Frazier, held back her tears while sudden anger and doubt suddenly showed within her eyes. "You!" she cried staring at Bill Pine.

The cameraman stepped back, confused.

"I'm sorry, Miss Frazier, really. But I only . . ."

"Pine was with me," I interrupted. "He can't be held responsible. Considering the angle at which the bullet entered Frazier, Pine was in the wrong place. If he had fired the gun, Frazier would have been shot from the front."

"I never had a gun," said Pine.

The Government man, an efficient, well put up person, suddenly tapped Bill Pine's pockets. Abruptly, his hand dipped into the photographer's camera satchel and brought forth an object which left the photographer aghast.

"A silencer," snapped the Government man. "Where's the gun?"

"I tell you, I didn't have one," Pine protested. He was utterly confused now and his mouth grew taut with anger.

"Better come along," the Government man advised.

After they had taken Pine away, I turned to Hodar and Dr. Wingate, saying, "You'd better return to the apartment and wait there. I'm afraid this isn't going to be as clear cut as it looks. I'll take Miss Frazier home."

As the car drove into the funnel of its own headlights and curved beyond the Capitol Building, finally sweeping along Maryland Avenue toward Anacostia, I watched the girl as she sat in the darkness beside me.

She guided the car with a reckless vehemence which gave proof of the emotional strain she outwardly covered so well. Already, my sensitive tulip nose had given me a clue as to the cause of this emotion. I knew that Lana Frazier was troubled by something deeper and more complicating than simply her father's sudden death.

The car swung into the suburban darkness of Benning Road, its tires

screeching and piercing the stillness of the night. It was then that I broke the silence hanging between us.

"Miss Frazier," I asked, tentatively. "What about the cameraman, Bill Pine?"

THE girl stared at me, startled. The ivory-like soft sweep of her cheek showed in the dashboard light. So did her uneasiness. "What about him?" she countered.

"You're angry with him," I ventured. "You acted as though you knew him. In fact, I think you're in love with him."

Lana Frazier gasped and her fingers tightened on the wheel. Then she laughed coldly. "You've been reading too much," she answered.

"I'm afraid not," I said. "My nose told me."

I quickly raced through a bit of personal history for her benefit, explaining how Martians like myself never use sound for speech. At least, I didn't until I came to Earth. On Mars we use—odors. That's not so bad if you know how to apply them and aren't indiscriminate about such things as Earthmen often are.

Our Martian salt-cellar-shaped bodies are loaded with more glands than the average Earthman would dare carry. We're walking file systems for glands and we have perfect control over all of them. With such control it is simple to converse without making a sound. We convey thoughts by odor frequencies.

"So you see," I told Miss Frazier. "Your thoughts or feelings send out minute electrical impulses which stimulate different glands. My tulip nose is like a recorder. It catches those odor-sounds. To me they said that you were both angry at Bill Pine, and in love with him."

"What if I am?" the girl replied candidly. "Bill and I have been secretly engaged for three months."

"Secretly?" I lingered over the word.

Lana Frazier nodded. "Dad doesn't approve of me marrying a newspaperman." The girl realized what she had said and caught her breath quickly, glancing at me. "No. Bill wouldn't have killed Dad over that," she said.

I turned the conversation, making a routine suggestion. "Did your father get many threatening calls?"

The girl shook her head. "Everyone liked Dad," she replied. "Oh . . . He did receive a strange note this morning which worried him. It was a code, but I don't think there was any threat in it."

"I'll have to see it," I said.

The girl agreed. For the next few minutes we were silent. I had a queer feeling that something strange, fantastic and violent was about to occur. It was an odd, suspended emotion which had no relation to fear. We Martians know no fear, but nevertheless, it chilled me as though a long, hairy-legged spider had crawled up my spine.

CHAPTER II

Golden Code

WE were met at the door of the Frazier mansion by a young man of medium height. He was round-faced and had sharp, calculating eyes. He was also slightly bald; a habit Earthmen develop at an early age and to me, one of the more curious customs of this planet.

"This is Phil Sheer," Lana introduced us. "Phil is Dad's private secretary."

Sheer stared at me suspiciously, then he took Lana's hand, saying, "I'm scrry, Lana. It was terrible about your father. They called ahead."

The frilled edges of my nose itched,

picking up some rather rampant sounds from Sheer's ductless glands. I was immediately aware that the young man was also in love with the girl—a kind of petulant, dissatisfied passion, like oysters out of season.

I followed them into the study: a large room furnished in light, angular modern comfort. Lana went directly to a wall safe hidden behind a swinging section of bookcase and soon her deft fingers twirled off the combination.

"How many people know it?" I asked.

The girl swung the small, circular steel door open. "Dad and I," she replied. "Here's the note," she added, handing me an envelope.

She and young Sheer stood close as I opened it and pulled out two sheets of note paper, one folded within the other. Glancing at the outer sheet first, I read:

To Secretary of Treasury:

Of national importance. Please consider it carefully.

—Sincerely, Alienette

I raised the note to my nose, sniffing it carefully for identifying odors. The letter had a very definite sound. It said something which I couldn't quite understand because Lana Frazier's perfume mixed with it. I looked at Lana and promptly blushed.

Finally, I took up the second note which read:

*Au 197.2 3.50 X 6.75 X 1.75 test
ok Somerset Final FKn 9.10*

Lana Frazier's pretty brow wrinkled. "I don't see what it means. It isn't a threat," she murmured.

"Doesn't seem to be anything," said Sheer.

My Martian mind, which can generally take a problem and reduce it to

its scientific factors and thus solve it, was completely puzzled here. This was no chemical or mathematical formula, I was certain. There were only two points on which I felt at all clear—the beginning and end.

"The *Au* is understandable," I spoke thoughtfully. "It's the scientific symbol for *aurum* or gold. Also, 197.2 happens to be the atomic weight for gold. I can't make sense from the remaining numerals, unless the final 9.10 is a date. Ninth month, tenth day. What is today?"

"September sixth," said Lana.

"And the final something will happen on the tenth," I added.

"What?" asked Lana.

"Don't know," I shrugged my salt-cellar-shaped body. "But whenever I run against something like this it's always bad. . . . Very bad. . . ." I looked at the girl, adding, "Your father had a lot to do with gold, didn't he?"

"He was Secretary of Treasury, if that's what you mean. He also owned shares in a marginal mine once," said Lana.

I WADDLED up and down the room, tapping one hand in the other while the girl and Sheer watched me curiously. "Marginal?" I murmured. Presently the house bell rang and a moment later a Negro servant appeared at the drawing room door. "Mista Pine, here," he announced.

I stopped short. "Pine? He's in jail."

"So you think, Oscar," I heard Pine's voice. The news photographer strode into the room. "I'm here, and it's legal."

"Bill—" Lana Frazier looked frightened.

"It's okay, honey," Pine grinned. "They dropped the charges. Oscar was right when they said the bullets came from the wrong direction. Now,

they've hauled in the Magician, Hodar, for questioning."

I fell back, stunned. "Hodar?"

"Yeah," Pine answered. "Sorry about that. You cleared me, only to put the finger of suspicion on your friend, eh?"

"They're crazy," I said flatly.

"Why crazy?" Pine asked.

"Because they're going to have to dig deeper to find who killed Frazier than merely arresting one or two men. They'll have to learn something about gold."

All three: Pine, Lana Frazier and Sheer looked at me oddly. "Gold?" they asked in unison.

I nodded and started for the door, grabbing Pine's arm as I went. "Listen," I explained, as we left the house. "You'd like to get a good story and you'd like to get clear of Frazier's murder, right? Well, we've got to work fast. First thing tomorrow you check at all the banks, brokerage houses and city directories. Keep your eye peeled for gold and for Somerset. I'm going to bed. See you tomorrow."

I AM not an early riser. Since coming to this planet I've discovered that good detectives sometimes stay up late, but they never crack an eyelid till noon at least. So the following day, it was not until noon that I awoke.

Dr. Wingate came in and he looked a little tired. He had spent a good part of the night working to free Hodar. Although I didn't know much about our host, he was a man with much influence in Washington and he was at least confident he had pulled the right strings.

Wingate brought me my usual morning Manhattan—a thing to pick any Martian up. He also left the morning papers. "Don't let them worry you, Oscar," he advised, bowing curtly before he left me alone.

Maybe the Doctor felt Martians

were not sensitive to criticism. He should have known better. The headlines in the paper were like a swift blow to the jaw.

OSCAR FLOPS ON NEW CASE TREASURY'S FRAZIER MURDERED

Official Washington was shocked late last night by the mysterious murder of John Frazier, Secretary of the Treasury, which occurred at a reception following an important Allied Nations strategy conference held here.

Frazier, a key figure in the American War Cabinet was shot down in the company of the sensational little detective from Mars, Oscar. Suspicion at the moment rests on Oscar's companion, Hodar, a professional magician who is being held by District police.

Full details of last night's crime are not available at present due to a tight censorship clamped down by police. One police official indicated developments, however, by stating: "Oscar is a detective. This is the biggest case he's seen. What's he doing? Nothing. Why? You figure it out."

The little Martian made his first appearance on Earth during a New York performance of his magician friend's show. The magician startled a blasé Manhattan audience by pulling Oscar, instead of a rabbit, from a tall hat. Oscar's subsequent career has been completely meteoric. Utilizing Martian techniques, he has solved one nationally important crime after another.

Tossing the paper aside angrily, I slipped from bed into my salmon pink robe and made a dash for the shower. I

was beginning to wonder if the papers were right. Was I slipping? The thought was as disturbing as that day in the past when the Government had me deported for a month on discovering I had entered the country illegally and there was no quota for Martians.

After the shower, I put on a new change of feather clothing, New York made, but modeled after the original Martian suit I had first come with. A little later some reporter came in and I released a statement.

"Who killed Frazier?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," I said. "But you have it on good authority that interesting developments will be forthcoming in the next twelve hours."

I smiled a little over this formula. It is something which Earth police are very fond of using in any pinch. The only difference was that when I issued it, it meant something to the press. The reporters raced out to make the afternoon deadlines.

By late afternoon, Bill Pine returned. He fished a sheaf of copy paper from his pocket, glanced through them then shook his head.

"There's too damn much gold in this country," he said. "I worked ten solid hours on this. It's mostly about gold mines in Alaska, the West and Mexico. None of them connects with Frazier directly."

"How about Somerset?" I asked.

Pine shot me an odd look.

"That was a queer hunch you had, Oscar," he grinned. "I located a Somerset Gold Survey Company. It's part of the National Gold Concern."

"Big company?" I asked.

"No. Pretty new. As far as I can find, they aren't listed as mine owners. They have land leases though."

I made a small clucking sound with my tongue for now I was really impressed. I also felt a bit anxious. There

seemed to be something peculiar, some underlying connection between the National Gold Concern and the death of Frazier. As yet, I had nothing positive to go on. It was just a feeling. And I had another feeling too.

Grabbing Bill Pine by the arm, I steered him toward the door. "Listen, man," I said. "Get over to Miss Frazier's. I think she'll need watching. Keep your eyes open while you're there."

Pine flashed me a queer glance, then went out without saying anything.

CHAPTER III

Little Man, Go South

WHEN Hodar was released on bail, shortly after supper, he came to the apartment and found me more or less in my cups. Martians like myself are not normally drinking men but this is one concession I make to my earthly profession. Furthermore, I just couldn't help myself.

I had been going over my notes and had happened to take a sniff of the letter signed—Alienette. Somehow, it made me feel terribly nostalgic. I became soft and pulpy, like an Irishman when he hears *Mother Machree*.

"Hodar," I murmured as my friend came in, "I've got a queer feeling something is going to happen. It's the nostalgia. I keep thinking about the fatherland."

"The fatherland?" Hodar blinked.

"Os-kan. Mars," I said. "Yes, every once in a while I get a whiff of the winds from off the Mare Cimerium. I lived there once, Hodar. You don't know what it feels like not to see little intellectual Martian kids playing around your door. I never felt like this before. I don't understand it. Maybe my time is up on Earth."

"What's gotten into your head, Oscar?"

I sat back in my chair. "Maybe I'll be whisked back to Mars, just as you jerked me out of that top hat in New York."

I could see Hodar grow pale. I knew that he'd miss me under any circumstances, but now he needed me as he had never needed me before. I just couldn't leave in the middle of a criminal case in which he was implicated. "Not right now, Oscar. Not in the middle of things," I heard him say.

The unhappy nod I gave him was interrupted by the ringing of the phone. I flipped up the receiver and listened to the vaguely familiar voice without quite placing it. I listened for a moment, then hung up and reached for my small silk topper.

"Bill Pine," I told Hodar, "wants me to meet him at some restaurant. You stay here and let no one in the apartment but Dr. Wingate."

While riding down the building elevator I tipped my hat politely to a blonde, then made my way to the street door where I paused for a second looking for a taxi.

Suddenly I jerked back, feeling my chest struck by an invisible blow, a whip lash as quick and hard as one of Joe Louis' lightning left jabs. A bare instant later I heard the rifle report reach out of the night's darkness.

One of the building elevator operators rushed toward me from the lobby. "What is it?" he asked. "Sounded like a gun."

"Sniper," I replied. "They made a mistake."

The elevator boy's mouth dropped an inch when he saw me shake my clothes and saw the bullet drop to the walk. It was as flat as a dime.

"You were hit," the boy gasped.

"Only on the surface," I nodded.

"Don't let it worry you."

Finally the lad recovered suffi-

ciently from his surprise to remember something. He handed me a folded note. "It came early," he explained. "The other fellow forgot to deliver it."

I opened the note, then raised my Martian brows as high as they would go, reading:

Oscar—You have one hour to return our ledger. Watch out.

"Who brought it?" I asked the elevator boy.

"I don't know," answered the boy. He opened the door of the cab which cruised to the curb. All the while he peered into the darkness, worrying about the shot. I slipped him a dollar and said, "Call a cop and have him look for someone with a rifle out there."

Settling back on the cab cushions, I gave the driver his instructions, then let my mind play with the fast moving events which had just occurred. It was not difficult to tie up the attempted shooting with my interest in the Frazier case, or with the definitely threatening tone of the note I had just received.

But the note itself left me at sea. There was something definitely wrong here. Some awful confusion. What were the ledgers? I knew I didn't have any ledgers and still, someone wanted them badly enough to take a shot at me. I gave off a tired odor-sigh and half wished I might be returned to Mars.

THE Acropolis Cafe, where I was to meet Pine, was what you Americans call a "joint." It was a small place with a counter running its full, narrow length, which the cockroaches used as a race track. Behind the counter there was a sign saying, "R. Popodopolus, prop." Beneath the sign I saw Mr. Popodopolus himself: a heavy-set, kindly Greek with tragic eyes.

"No. I no see tall man come in," he answered when I inquired about Bill Pine. "Nobody eat here for hours. That is the trouble with Greek restaurant. Lose customer all the time." He slid a cup of coffee before me, then regarded my tulip nose sadly.

"The nose," he went on unhappily, "The nose is bad thing for my business. We got million Greek restaurant all over world but we got no business. You wanna know why? Because, garlic."

"Garlic?" I asked.

"Yeah, garlic. Americans no like garlic. I can no cook without garlic."

While listening and waiting for Bill Pine, I passed the time by putting my comptometer-swift brain to work. Borrowing a pencil, I quickly wrote out a formula on a paper napkin and handed it to the Greek.

"Send this to the Department of Agriculture," I said. "They'll fix you up. It'll mean a renaissance for hash-joints the country over."

The formula I had just tossed off consisted of simple, workable directions on cross-breeding garlic and onion, thus producing a new vegetable—garlion. It would retain the delicate flavors of the old two but would have no odor.

A few more minutes passed, then Bill Pine appeared. He was breathing heavily as he dropped upon the stool beside me. "Boy," he grunted. "You don't give a guy much time to cross town. What did you want?"

I stared at him in bewilderment.

"What did I want?" I said.

Pine's good looking face turned on me blankly. His forehead creased in a series of puzzled ridges. "You phoned me," he said.

I shook my head. Quickly realizing that something was amiss, I stood up and started for the door. Pine's

thoughts must have run in the same direction for his mouth hardened. "I've got to get back," he said. "Lana."

Pine left with the sudden impetuosity of a newspaper man in love. As for myself, I didn't waste time either. The phone calls which had drawn us together were clearly calls to get both Pine and me away from the places we should be.

Within the space of ten minutes I was back at Dr. Wingate's apartment and was anxiously fitting my key into the door. Remembering the sniper who had shot at me in the street below, I realized that I should have taken a moment to warn Hodar. But my uneasiness was soon relieved. Hodar was in the apartment, examining a huge pile of books which had been dumped on the couch.

"Anyone been here?" I asked.

"Wingate came and went a little while ago," said Hodar. "Just before you brought these ledgers."

"Ledgers?" I asked. "Ledgers—" the word struck a responsive chord in my mind. Again I heard the sniper's gun echoing and my fingers automatically reached for the note the elevator boy had given me. Hurrying to the couch, I examined one of the fat, canvas bound books. On its stiff cover was printed—NATIONAL GOLD CONCERN: TRANSACTIONS. It was enough to make me suck my breath in with utter surprise.

"Where'd you find these?" I demanded.

Hodar stiffened a little and shot me a worried look. "Where did I find them—" he exploded. "You brought them yourself about five minutes ago."

I STOOD there, gazing at Hodar as though he were mad. "The devil I brought them," I said. "I was with Pine, uptown. How could I be here

and there?"

"But I saw you come in," Hodar protested.

"Impossible."

For a moment the two of us just stood there, staring at one another. I could see the doubt in Hodar's eyes and I even began worrying about our respective mental conditions. Perhaps the strain of these last twenty hours was beginning to tell.

Suddenly Hodar leaped to my side. "What's wrong, Oscar? Are you sick?"

I was still holding the ledger book when I suddenly felt myself go faint. It was that feeling of nostalgia coming back. For the space of a minute or two I suffered the strangest interplay of emotions, an utter sense of loneliness.

"The nostalgia," I murmured, feeling the feverish warmth of my forehead.

"You look like you're mooning," said Hodar.

"It's the odor from the ledger book," I said at last. "Hodar, I've got a queer feeling that something is going to happen to me soon. There seems to be some fantastic connection between the nostalgia and every bit of new evidence I get. Maybe I *am* going to disappear."

"Nonsense. The United States can't spare you."

I realized this only too well and made a strong effort to control myself. As I opened the ledger book to glance at its contents, I had to shut my tulip-shaped nose to the memory arousing odors the book seemed drenched in. Actually, I felt like a Frenchman sitting in a concentration camp, hearing an English radio play the *Marseillaise*.

Finally getting down to business and inspecting the books, I found them full of name lists and, oddly, very little about gold mine transactions. Two notations aroused my curiosity however. One was that the Gold Concern had

purchased a large stock of explosives as well as arms. The second was that the concern had bought a strip of land for experimental purposes. The land was somewhere near Somerset, Kentucky.

"But why buy land there?" Hodar asked speculatively. "There's no gold to speak of in Kentucky or Tennessee. It's wild region, but mostly limestone."

I shrugged my drape-shoulders thoughtfully.

"We're going to Kentucky," I said. "When Dr. Wingate comes in, ask him to make the arrangements."

"Hunch, eh?" Hodar asked.

I nodded. "Yes. Frazier's death isn't an ordinary case," I said. "I know the signs. Somerset links up mysteriously with the code Frazier received and with the National Gold Concern. Hodar, we haven't much time. We've got to explore this Gold Concern."

Tossing the ledger book back on the couch with the others, I stared at the pile worriedly. These, also, were a problem. How had they come here? Whatever thoughts I may have had about this angle were suddenly pushed from my mind when the doorbell began ringing frantically.

Hodar answered it and a moment later Philip Sheer burst into the room. His face was smeared with blood, his clothes torn and he was gasping for breath as he dropped on a chair and stared at me wildly.

"Sheer! What is it?" I demanded. I was at his side instantly.

"Kidnapped," he said, between drags on his breath. "Lana . . . kidnapped."

"Where's Pine?" I snapped.

Sheer got control of himself. "They got Lana," he repeated. "A blue limousine . . . came to the house . . . machine-guns. Four men took her . . . I tried to stop them and they knocked me out . . . I saw Pine in the limousine."

CHAPTER IV

Plot for Panic

THE temporary headquarters Dr. Wingate located for us in Kentucky was a fine old estate in a blue-grass valley completely hemmed in by wild, picturesque hills. We arrived at midday, following a hurried overnight flight from Washington to Louisville by plane, then by car to Cumberland County.

The ride was not all pleasantness however. Both Hodar and Wingate were put out by this sudden change of scene. Hodar was aghast that I should leave the capitol while Lana Frazier was in the hands of the kidnappers. It had been shocking enough to discover that Bill Pine had been one of them.

"I was afraid this might happen," I told Hodar. "The only way we'll find the girl is to rip this entire case wide open. I think our being down here will do it."

As we drove up to the rambling Southern mansion which was flanked by huge white colonnades I forgot our problems for the moment. Looking at the estate, I was at once aware of why Scarlett O'Hara had trouble with her men. It must have taken an army of men to support a Southern gal in the manner to which she was accustomed.

"It takes money to practice Southern chivalry on this scale," Hodar explained.

I didn't quite understand what he meant. I had always imagined chivalry was a matter of heart. On Mars the people in the Northwest region have two hearts pumping in their bodies, and their rate of chivalry is much higher than, for example, my own.

Our talk of chivalry lasted only a little while. I, for one, refused to be sidetracked. During the remainder of

the afternoon I studied geologic and road maps of Kentucky and the surrounding states, hoping somewhere I might find the key with which to solve the bewildering tangle of details arising from Secretary Frazier's murder.

I sent Hodar off to the town of Somerset to check up on the office of the Gold Concern there and he returned quite late, reporting they were closed. It looked as though I was getting nowhere—then the afternoon papers from Louisville were delivered.

What I saw in the papers almost caused me to faint. My eyes fairly leaped over the scare headline and plunged into the body of the article while both Hodar and Dr. Wingate crowded around me.

"It's a trick," said Hodar.

"Gag? Nothing!" I gasped. "Look at that headline."

SECRET GROUP PLOTS TO GRAB U. S.

September 8 (Exclusive)—A startling, nation-wide plot by which a powerful and still unrevealed group plans to seize control of the United States Government was revealed to the editors of the Louisville Dispatch here this afternoon as a result of the discovery of an amazing document. The named document, it is said, is scheduled to be handed to a secret emergency session of Congress, Friday, Sept. 10th. (Photostat of document on page two.)

"Great Martian Saints," I murmured. My fingers felt as thick as a handful of baseball bats while I excitedly turned to page two. "Here it is!" I ran my finger along the printed copy of the document.

To the President and Congress

of the United States: This country is now on the brink of a catastrophic financial panic. Our representatives will present proof after these demands are read. Only the NGC can prevent a complete and total collapse of the government and the economic structure of the country. Our demands are as follows:

1. *Immediate withdrawal of the United States from the war.*
2. *That satisfactory peace treaties be completed with the individual Axis powers.*
3. *That Lend-Lease and other aids to the Allied Nations be ended immediately.*
4. *That the American Armed Force be reduced in size (to peace time limitations) and that strict secrecy be maintained. That the people of the nation shall not be warned of these changes until we see fit to make such an announcement.*

"LORD!" Hodar's voice was shocked and vibrant. "So this is what's behind the Frazier murder."

I quickly turned back to page one which I had scanned hastily, and now went over it with more care. In the middle of the lead article I got the worst shock of my life. There it was—in black print:

. . . The original document, now in the hands of the FBI, was delivered to the Louisville Dispatch office this afternoon by Oscar, the Martian Detective, in person. (See picture, back page.)

I felt as weak as though someone were hacking at my legs with a fireman's axe. Hodar grabbed the paper and turned it over to the back page.

That was the final blow. There was only one picture there and it covered the entire page. I stared, absolutely unable to believe my eyes. There I saw myself, dapperly sitting on a desk. A bluff-featured man wearing a celluloid eye-shade was shaking my hand. The caption beneath the picture read:

Oscar, the Detective of Mars, receiving congratulations from Editor E. M. Willis during his visit to the Dispatch office this afternoon.

Suddenly I let out a despairing "gurrp" and staggered across the room to a mirror and stared dazedly at my reflection. Yes, I was still here. At least, I was in the mirror. Somewhat reassured, I turned toward Hodar and gazed at him suspiciously.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" I demanded.

"Joke?" Hodar looked blank.

It was clear that my friend was as confused as I was. No. This wasn't any of his theatrical magic at work. It was something worse. "But I'm in two places at once," I mumbled. "That can't be."

"It's a hoax," Dr. Wingate put in. He was as upset as the rest of us for he and I had been together the entire afternoon. "I'll get in touch with the paper," he said.

"Wait a second," I cut in as something began to stir my more rational thoughts. "This business connects up too well. Don't you see. Frazier's death linked with the National Gold Concern led up to Kentucky. Then, all at once, the Louisville, Kentucky, papers spring this business and mention the NGC—National Gold Concern."

"Nonsense, Oscar," Dr. Wingate shook his head. "I can't picture a single company, particularly a gold

company getting control of the American government."

"But is it a gold company?" I asked.

I began pacing the floor, my hands clasped behind me, my Martian brow wrinkling fretfully.

"The document threatens a gigantic panic for America," I said abruptly. "How do you engineer a panic? Have there been other ones?" I looked at Hodar.

My magician friend nodded. "Panics," he said thoughtfully. "Well, the 1929 breakup was bad, but not catastrophic. There was a much worse panic in the '90's during the Cleveland administration. If I remember rightly, the country was saved from complete collapse when a group of financiers offered the government unlimited gold credits."

"Gold credits . . . Gold!" I snapped at the idea.

"But we've probably got the biggest chunk of world gold supply right now. It's a pretty solid foundation for our economic house at the moment," Hodar countered.

"What if the gold supply was stolen or destroyed?" I asked.

"There'd be a panic all right," Dr. Wingate nodded.

I brightened, carrying the fantastic idea onward. "It's simple," I explained. "Threaten the gold reserve and the government is secretly blackmailed into complying with any demands the Gold Concern wants. The people won't know it happened until it's too late."

Ignoring the doubtful looks Hodar and the Doctor cast at me, I went to the table which contained my maps and notes. "Look," I pointed out. "The Frazier code—I've got the answer! *Au 197.2 3.50 × 6.75 × 1.75 test ok Somerset Final F Kn 9.10.* You know what that means? Listen—Gold 3½ inches by 6¾ inches by 1¾ inches, test

okay in Somerset, Final at FK_n September 10th."

"What are the inches?" Hodar asked, puzzled. "And what is the FK_n?"

I could feel my own excitement growing.

"The inch figures together make up the exact dimensions of the gold bullion bars cast by the Mint for the U.S. Gold Depositories." I ran my finger toward the northwest area on my Kentucky map, saying, "FK_n in the code might mean, Fort Knox, America's greatest gold storehouse."

Dr. Wingate looked pale around the gills. His trim figure looked as though it had taken a severe beating. Hodar appeared even more shocked.

"Destroy Fort Knox—" he gasped.

"That's what it looks like, doesn't it?" I said grimly. "If I'm right experimental tests were probably made in the hill somewhere between here and Somerset. Now they're set for the final blow. It'll be Fort Knox with bombs or something."

CHAPTER V

The Ingot Fortress

THE night's darkness was flooded with a strange, animated emotion as our car roared along the highway which wound across Kentucky like a huge, twisting ribbon.

Hodar, Doctor Wingate and I had left the house shortly after midnight, bound for Fort Knox. The suspense and anxiety that rode with us in the car had already been built up to gratifying tension by the fact that America was on the alert. We were delayed a number of times by highway patrols who questioned us. In each town we picked up new snatches of reports on how the police in larger cities were

rounding up suspicious groups.

But even in these "minute men" precautions there existed a certain bitter irony. The country had been warned, in fact, shocked into action, just as on the day of Pearl Harbor; yet, only Hodar, Wingate and I knew how or where the blow would fall. Furthermore, we were the only ones who knew of Bill Pine's connection in the case, whatever his role might be. I wondered what his ties were with the Gold Concern.

And we had other worries also.

"They've been exposed now," Hodar said, his face drawn with the same overlapped tension that gripped each of us. "But they might try to get at Fort Knox before the tenth."

He jammed the gas pedal to the floor, giving vent to his fear that an attempt to destroy the fort might be timed for any moment.

I glanced at my watch. Five o'clock. In less than an hour we would be at the fort. Already, a faint tinge of yellow and blue edged between the hill-broken horizon and the darker sky. I watched the dawn unfold, making out the features of the landscape, the rugged country and the single road that led to the fort itself.

At length we drove past the gateway of the Government Reserve and approached the fort headquarters. Hodar and I went in and I presented my credentials as a Martian detective to Major Starr, the officer in charge. The Major, a square shouldered man with a face as hard and solid as America itself, watched us oddly as we explained our mission.

"You think they'll try getting at the gold, eh?" he shrugged, a half ironic smile on his mouth.

"That's what it adds up to," I replied.

Major Starr took my arm and prac-

tically propelled me from the headquarters and pointed toward a squat, two storied, solidly constructed building.

"You're a clever man, Oscar," the Major smiled. "But look at that. It's the gold vault. I'll show you through, then challenge you to figure out a way to walk off with Uncle Sam's bank roll."

We headed across a well-kept lawn toward the imposing fortress. The place did indeed give me the impression of impregnability with its heavy concrete bastions, machine-gun turrets and military guard stationed every so many feet.

"This isn't all," the Major explained. "It's absolutely bomb proof. The walls are steel, coated with layers of concrete. Their thickness is a Treasury Department secret. I don't even know. If you think you can drill through the concrete you'll run into the steel which shoots off a deadly gas soon as a blowtorch or drill touches the plates."

"Tunneling?" I asked.

The army man laughed. "No chance," he said. "The walls of the inner vault where the gold is kept are pinned on bedrock. A seismograph touches off an alarm system if anyone explodes anything nearby or dry-mines."

ENTERING the fortress, Hodar, the Doctor and I followed Major Starr like school kids on an educational tour. The Major waved his hand toward a group of working men who were laying in pipes from the treasure vault to a pumping building some distance away. A soldier stood guard by each man.

"Plumbers," said Starr. "We're finishing the flood control defense. In case of danger we can flood the gold room in three minutes. That plus anti-tank guns, machine-guns, concrete, steel, gas and water makes us pretty tough to crack. If you're around to-

morrow we show you a full defense test; everything in action."

"How much gold is there?" Hodar asked.

"Treasury Department secret," Starr stated. "The only release ever given out was that the first shipment brought here was over ten billion dollars. Lot more here now."

"Are you sure it can't be blown up?" I asked.

The Major smiled. "Positive. You can't beat the fort. If anyone tries to walk out with gold he's got to pass through a brigade of soldiers. Fort Knox is surrounded."

After leaving the gold vault we continued our tour of inspection, taking in the communication center, the army barracks and the pumping house which drew from the Ohio river and could dump a few hundred thousand gallons of water into the gold fort within a few minutes. Although feeling more at ease, I was still puzzled. I knew there must be some way in which the Fort could be cracked. I've been around Earthmen long enough to know that they've never built anything which one of their number cannot destroy. It was my job to find the weak spot.

"Well?" asked Major Starr as we ended the inspection, "think you can beat our defense?"

I shook my head slowly. A new, uneasy doubt crept into my thoughts. Had I made a mistake in figuring out the code? Did it mean something else? It must have because even my lightning Martian brain couldn't figure out a way for an Earthman to get at this gold.

Glancing at Hodar, I said, "I think we'd better go back. I've slipped somewhere . . . I know! Somerset!"

Somerset was another good five hours drive back over the same road we had come during the night. But this time Hodar and I went alone. Dr. Wingate

went on to Louisville in an army car to investigate the *Dispatch* story which by now was appearing in papers throughout all the country.

In spite of the sunny warmth of the day, I remained in a peevish mood. I even believe I was angry because the Treasury Department had built its gold depository so solidly. I felt that at last I, Oscar of Mars, had run into a case that had me stopped. The run back to Somerset was my final desperate chance to make some sense out of the mystery.

It was while filled with such thoughts that we drove into the Somerset region, a heavily wooded, hilly area as primitive as in the days of Dan Boone.

Our car whirled past a thick patch of woods when suddenly I heard four rifle shots, one upon the other. At once, the car wobbled madly, swerving from road-edge to road-edge. "Tires," Hodar shouted. "They're all flat."

"They were shot," I answered.

Hodar glanced at me as the car halted, then past me. He had a very queer expression on his face. I turned, following the startled sweep of his gaze until I saw *them*.

AT FIRST, I wasn't sure whether they were Earthmen or not. There were two of them—perhaps the strangest creatures I have yet seen on this planet. They were tall, extremely thin and they peered at us with their shoe-button black eyes. I noticed that they wore a kind of drooping straw head cover which also shaded their long, horse-like faces.

"Mountaineers," said Hodar.

I watched their feet now and was even more amazed. They went shoeless and their toes were as flexible as fingers. Both of them carried long rifles which seemed to be as much a part of them as their bare feet.

"Mountaineers," I repeated appreciatively. I didn't realize at this moment how much I would come to admire these Kentuckians. I was soon to find that they were the cream of American manhood.

The two mountaineers approached the car, keeping the rifle muzzles centered on us in a most careless fashion. "Yuh folks is thim revenooers we been expectin ta shoot, ain't cha?" said the first one.

"Revenooers?" I was puzzled.

"Revenue agents," Hodar whispered. "The mountaineers declared war on the Department of Internal Revenue a few generations ago and they've never been conquered."

One of the mountaineers, the more talkative one, drenched a crawling spider some four feet away with a deadly accurate gob of tobacco juice. He said, "We hain't shot at revenooers fur about a year. Bout time more come snoopin around. Yuh is thim, ain't yer?"

"No. Do I look like one?" I asked.

Both mountaineers shook their heads. The talkative one drawled, "Wal, if yer ain't it's no use ta shoot yer. Me, I'm Clem. This here," —he pointed at his companion— "he's Eb. Yuh sure yer ain't from the Martin clan?"

Hodar reassured the two that we were New Yorkers.

"Wal," said Clem, "Guess mebbie yuh better foller us. The boys hain't never seen any Nooyawkers. Kinda appreciate it."

They motioned us to follow them. The drawling order was punctuated with a casual nod from their rifles. Hodar flashed me a quick glance, implying that we had better follow. Although anxious over being delayed, there was nothing we could do but humor these men.

They marched us through the hills for a half hour and at last, we came to an open space beside a creek. My gaze swept past the crude log cabin there to a clearing where some fifteen men, all looking exactly like our two escorts, were busy around a huge, enclosed copper vat.

"Scientists?" I said quickly.

"A still," Hodar replied. "They're making White Mule."

The rest of the mountaineers gathered around us curiously as we entered the circle. Naturally, they were keenly interested in me. I was the first Martian they had ever seen. Not wishing to let them down, I preened myself, showing off my dapper penguin-shape and fluttering my tulip nose.

"Nooyawkers," explained Clem.

In a very short time we were all fairly friendly. Of course, it took a little diplomacy to break through the innate suspicions of these people, but Hodar did the job by performing a few minor feats of magic such as converting his watch into a small size cream separator.

TO SHOW that they weren't to be toyed with, a few of the mountain men gave us an exhibition of plain and fancy shooting. Clem's shooting was particularly eloquent. He whipped out a long horse pistol, spread the toes of his right foot and without the slightest hesitation or taking any aim, fired a bullet between each toe. Not a particle of skin was grazed between them.

He looked up at Hodar and down at me while the pistol's smoke curled up the barrel. "Thot thar might be ants down thar," he drawled.

"You ought to be in the army?" Hodar suggested.

"Ain't no need," said Clem. "Ain't no war."

"Sure there's a war," Hodar replied.

"Who we fightin'?"

"The Axis."

Clem scratched his head. "Is they an enemy?"

Hodar nodded.

Clem looked at the other mountaineers and said, "Boys, yuh hear that. T's nother war. We gotta join up afore it's too late. We'll finish off the Mule, then git on ta Washington and tell 'em we're ready."

The men cheered, fired a couple of shots and crowded around the still while one of the men drew off the Mule into jugs. To a Martian like myself, White Mule is something phenomenal. It has all the effects of high test gasoline and none of its subtleties.

I took one sip of the stuff, then abruptly dashed Hodar's jug from his hand. My sensitive nose caught a definite, alarming odor. "Don't drink it," I warned him. Then I shouted at the other mountain men.

It was plain my warning came too late. The mountaineers were consuming enormous quantities of White Mule and enjoying it.

"What's wrong?" Hodar asked.

"Trichloride," I answered. "A deadly poison. Can't you smell it?"

Hodar grew deathly pale. Then his expression turned to one of amazement as he pointed at the mountaineers. "Look," he gasped. "The colors."

The mountaineers were still drinking but their faces began to turn various shades of livid purple, orange and yellow. This, I knew instantly, was the result of trichloride in certain chemical combinations. It had become a dyeing agent. But the thing which most amazed me was that these men were apparently enjoying themselves to their fullest.

"Men can't drink that stuff and live," I exclaimed.

"They can," said Hodar. "They're

doing it. It proves what's been said about their cast iron stomachs."

Something else began bothering me, now that my first moments of shock and amazement had worn away. I cornered Clem. Being very curious as to why they flavored their drinks with trichloride, I asked, "Listen, Clem. Do you folks turn colors often?"

"Nope," he replied, the color of his face receding to a pale lavender. "Just happened on the last two batches we pulled. I think maybe the water done it."

"Water? From where?" I asked quickly.

He jerked his thumb toward the narrow creek which ran below the cabin. There was but a light trickle of water in it and it wound away through the vivid green brush. It was then that my Martian intuition went into action.

"Come on, Hodar," I shouted. "The answer to the Frazier code is up this creek."

CHAPTER VI

Secret of the Code

TOGETHER we plunged through the brush, following the upward bends of the creek. The mountaineers scarcely noticed that we had disappeared they were so preoccupied with the opportunity of joining the army. I went a little ahead of Hodar, bending almost double so that my sensitive tulip nose could pick up the faint odor of trichloride.

"What's the creek got to do with the Frazier code?" Hodar asked once while I paused, sidetracked by another odor which turned out to be a cow spoor.

"Who knows?" I replied, starting off again. "But there is a connection. You know what trichloride is?"

Hodar remained silent.

"Some day I'll tell you about science," I murmured.

The trichloride trail was quite vague. It was as though it had been dumped into the creek a few days ago. Small deposits of the stuff had snagged along the creek banks, but with my nose, an odor, no matter how elusive, is never lost. I followed the tart scent for a half hour, then abruptly climbed the creek bank and went to the left. Presently I saw a glass-lined pipe which extended from the bank, back into the thick brush.

"It came out through this," I said. "Pipe needs a glass lining to carry trichloride. We'll follow it."

The new trail led us a short way through the woods and to the edge of another clearing. Suddenly Hodar grabbed my arm and jerked me down behind cover.

"Someone in the cabin there," he whispered.

Peering ahead, I saw the log cabin. A heavy-set man lolled in the sunlight near the door. He had a light machine-gun on his lap. "Must be others inside," Hodar added, pointing toward the slow curl of smoke that came from the cabin's chimney. "I'll go back for the mountaineers," he suggested.

I held him back. "No. Not now," I whispered. "We can't waste the time."

"They're armed."

"That's nothing," I replied thoughtfully. "I've got an idea."

I pulled a tiny gadget, an extremely thin platinum diaphragm, from my pocket. Hodar stared at it curiously—and no wonder. It happened to be something no man has ever seen on Earth because along its thin edge was printed the phrase, **MADE ON MARS**. I had it in my pocket that fateful day when I had found myself transplanted from my Martian home to this planet.

As yet, I had had no occasion to use it.

"What's that?" Hodar asked.

"Voice Dispersion."

Fitting the flexible platinum diaphragm snugly over my tulip nose, I began talking through my nose much as a Frenchman does. The results were, of course, amazing. Hodar almost collapsed when he heard and saw the results.

To my friend's astonishment the nearby woods filled with a gigantic assortment of sounds, bugle calls, tramping of many feet and grinding tones remarkably like those made by tanks. It was as if an army brigade was moving up on the log hut. Orders rang out on all sides:

"Company tenshun . . . Squads left . . . Lieutenant, sight your cannons . . . light machine gun company, enfilade . . . cover doors and windows . . . sappers . . . stand ready men . . ."

THE guard at the hut's doorway leaped to his feet, threw aside his gun and plunged into the cabin like a frightened rabbit. Almost at once, someone within the cabin cautiously poked an arm out the window and waved a white flag.

Again I vibrated the platinum nose-piece. Another order rang out from across the clearing.

"We accept your surrender. Throw your weapons into the clearing!"

Hodar's eyes fairly bulged when two more light machine-guns, an assortment of pistols and some brass knuckles sailed out the cabin door and clattered on the hard ground. I pushed Hodar ahead. "Now we've got guns," I said.

Arming ourselves hastily, we pushed into the cabin and found four frightened men. While Hodar tied them, they sent worried glances toward the door as though they expected the entire United States Army to move in with all its

wrath. That took but a moment. I now turned to another door which led to a small storeroom and pushed it open.

"Miss Frazier! Bill Pine!" I suddenly cried out.

I saw them both—man and girl. They were lying upon a straw matting and both were bound and gagged. It took but an instant to slash the ropes holding them. The look Lana Frazier blessed me with as I finished untying Bill Pine was one I shall never forget.

"Thank God, Oscar," the girl murmured, swaying to her feet a bit unsteadily. Suddenly she collapsed into Bill Pine's arms and I felt kind of foolish for I had hoped she would fall my way, even if I am only half her size. Didn't I rescue her?

"It's okay, Oscar," Pine grinned. "Strain has been tough on her. How'd you know they grabbed both Lana and me at the same time?"

"Phil Sheer," I said.

The next moment or so seemed quite delicate. Pine was busy teaching the girl this American custom of fastening one pair of lips over the other and getting fun out of it. I turned my eyes aside and politely surveyed the prison room.

It was really a makeshift laboratory. Bottles of chemicals lined a shelf, retorts and scales stood on a nearby table. A pipe led from an experimental basin, through the log wall to the outside and toward the river. This was the trichloride route.

The rows of chemicals set my mind working.

I grabbed Bill Pine's hand and slipped a gold signet ring from his finger. "Don't ask me why," I said. "Just give it to me and clear out. I want to be alone for a while."

A laboratory is the nearest thing to heaven as far as I am concerned. For the next half hour I worked as though

in a trance. I snooped from bottle to bottle of chemicals, allowing my sensitive Martian nose to absorb odors which to me are sounds.

There were some very interesting combinations here. A mixture of hydrochloric acid and two parts bromine sounded like a scorching *boogie woogie*. The most interesting smell from a connoisseur's standpoint was one I found in a brown, elegantly designed bottle marked *Four Roses*. It sounded like a well harmonized version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "The Wearing o' the Green."

In fact, it even tasted good.

Toward the end of my operations Hodar came in.

"Pine says these Gold Concern people really have a way of getting at the Fort Knox gold," Hodar explained. "He couldn't hear much except that they'll do it tomorrow. The four we captured are just gangsters. The real people are still at large."

I ended my experiment with a satisfied sigh and went into the next room with Hodar. Ignoring Hodar's worries, I said, "I've just discovered what this house was used for. It was a testing place to dissolve gold in. I just did it to Bill's ring."

"Dissolve gold?" Hodar asked, perplexed.

"Sure. They dissolve gold with *aqua regia** and drain it off into the creek through the glass-lined pipe as trichloride, or soluble gold."

"Fort Knox!" Hodar's eyes were wide.

"Right," I answered. "It's so simple it's criminal. *They'll destroy the gold in the Fort by dissolving it.* Somehow the Gold Concern people got in at the

Fort's flood defense system. They'll drain the gold off into the Ohio River so it will be almost impossible to regain it. Even Major Starr won't know until it's too late. You see what that means? It will disrupt American economy, wreck our war production schedule."

"Oscar—," Hodar's voice carried a strange impact. "Tomorrow! Remember, Major Starr said they were going to test the flood defense tomorrow morning!"

THE late afternoon sun shot its rays sharply across the driveway of the mansion which was our headquarters when Bill Pine, Lana and I marched our four prisoners toward the house. Hodar wasn't with us. He had been sent back to contact the Kentucky mountaineers.

"Bring the prisoners in," I ordered Bill and Lana while I raced ahead.

Bursting into the house and reaching the drawing room, I stopped short. My eyes swept the half dozen men in the room. They were all very important looking and well dressed, but somehow, they didn't quite seem American. They also seemed surprised at my coming. Then I saw Philip Sheer standing near Dr. Wingate.

Both the Doctor and Sheer were staring. But not at me. Their eyes were fixed on the four gangsters Bill Pine escorted into the room. "Friends," I beamed.

"What'll I do with them?" Pine called to me.

"Hold them," I said as I hurried toward the phone in the library beyond. "I'm calling the Fort."

"Wait!" Philip Sheer's voice snapped at me harshly. "Don't touch that phone."

I halted abruptly, seeing the revolver in Sheer's hand. No. I wasn't frightened by Sheer's clipped tone, nor by the

* *Aqua regia*—a corrosive, fuming yellow liquid made by mixing nitric acids and hydrochloric acids, 1 to 3 by volume. Through the action of the chlorine it liberates, gold is dissolved and converted into trichloride.—Ed.

thinned down cast of his lips. His gun was not levelled at me. It was centered upon Lana Frazier.

The girl had gone pale. "Phil, what's happened?" she cried.

Sheer ignored the girl's frantic plea and flashed me a quick, dangerous glance. "Not one move, Oscar," he snapped. "You're wanted by the F.B.I."

CHAPTER VII

Double for Oscar

"THE F.B.I.?" Bill Pine cut between Sheer and Lana. "Cut it, Sheer," he said angrily. "Before Oscar's through they'll be tacking medals on him."

Suddenly Pine's mouth dropped. He moved his eyes slowly around the circle of men in the room. Each one now carried a gun and they were all centered on Lana, Pine and myself. I saw Pine's fingers relax as he let his own gun drop. "Good God," he protested, "you can't do this. Not now."

"I'm afraid they can, Bill," I interrupted. "Sheer isn't holding us for any F.B.I. He's here to keep us from warning Fort Knox!"

"So clever, eh?" Sheer spoke in a clipped, precise tone that was almost foreign.

"Great guns!" Pine gasped, his eyes open at last.

"I wouldn't be too surprised," I told Pine. "All together, this is the National Gold Concern. A fancy front for Axis agents in this country. Dr. Wingate, I don't know what his real name is, is head of the Concern. And Sheer—just another Nazi agent. A clever one. I think it was his idea to flood the gold vault at Fort Knox with *aqua regia*. He was in position, as secretary to Frazier, to hand-pick the plumbers at Fort Knox. They put in glass pipes, screwed

up the flooding system to take acids in instead of water."

"*Halt dein munde!*" Sheer snapped.

I heard Lana Frazier draw in her breath incredulously. She stared at Sheer, in a dazed, horrified manner.

"I'm sorry, Lana," I murmured. "Sheer fooled a lot of people. So did Wingate."

"Did he—" the girl hesitated.

"No. He didn't actually kill your father," I answered quickly. "Your father was murdered by Dr. Wingate. Sheer knew your father had gotten the mysterious code. Afraid that your father might discover its meaning, he called Wingate. The doctor was at the reception in Washington and he shot your father. When he pushed past Bill Pine at the door he dropped his gun-silencer in Bill's pocket."

Philip Sheer waved his pistol impatiently. Turning to Dr. Wingate, he spoke rapidly in German. I didn't understand entirely but I got the idea that they were worried about Hodar who wasn't with us.

Then Bill Pine said, "Sounds like they're going to shoot us."

I saw the look of horror run into Lana Frazier's eyes and then caught the movement of the Gold Concern men as they moved toward us. Lana cringed back.

"Grab them," Sheer shouted.

Abruptly, a rifle shot cracked outside in the twilight. The glass in one window tinkled, shattered. One of the Gold Concern men let out a painful cry as his gun went spinning across the floor.

A second shot crashed nearby. I heard the bullet zip past my head and neatly clip through Dr. Wingate's vest, cutting his suspenders away. The Doctor dropped his gun and grabbed frantically for his pants.

Rifles shot in from the outside at a terrific rate. Bullets zipped everywhere

within the room. The Gold Concern men dropped their weapons and slid to the floor to avoid the fury of those death-spined bullets.

Bill Pine and I stood there like idiots. Never had we seen such shooting. Object after object in the room shattered like clay pipes in a shooting gallery. Pictures crashed to the floor as their wires were cut. A chandelier in the center of the ceiling lost each of its crystals without a single electric bulb being touched.

Shooting with such telling accuracy could only mean one thing. The word was on my lips in an instant. "Mountaineers," I shouted to Pine.

A moment later the fireworks stopped. I snatched up the Doctor's gun and covered the Gold Concern men. "Okay, get up," I said. "Back against the wall." Meanwhile, I saw Bill Pine singling out Philip Sheer. Sheer was in a violent rage when suddenly Pine's fist lashed out.

"A pleasure," Pine grunted as the impact jarred from his fist, down through his arm to shoulder and body. Sheer stiffened momentarily. His eyes looked glazed and foolish. Suddenly his knees buckled and his body crumbled to the floor.

"Beautiful." The compliment came from the doorway, and both Pine and I turned in time to see Hodar run in. A number of lean, button-eyed mountaineers followed him.

I was on the verge of crying out happily when, all at once, my voice thinned out and my eyes suddenly bulged as I stared at the small, dapper, tulip-nosed figure who came in beside Hodar. It was me—or was it?

My whole body trembled and I blinked my eyes incredulously, trying to clear my vision while I stared, aghast. The figure was still there—four foot five, feathered Martian clothes,

penguin shape, salmon skin *and, that tulip nose!*

Hodar now gaped at the other figure and at me, open mouthed. Bill Pine, Lana and the Gold Concern men wore the expressions of people who had lost their grip on reality. I just couldn't stand it any longer. Handing my gun to Bill Pine, I shut my eyes tightly and promptly fainted; the first time I had ever tried this on Earth.

IT could have been an hour later or, perhaps, only a few minutes when my eyes fluttered open again. I felt around and knew that I was flat on my back and feeling something like Joan of Arc—I heard voices all around me.

Something strong gurgled down my tulip nose and I sat up abruptly, pushing aside the mountaineer who was siphoning a jug of whiskey into my nose. On my left I noticed the other Martian figure holding my hand tenderly while Hodar knelt in front of me.

Hodar still looked bewildered.

"Which of you is Oscar?" he asked anxiously.

"I am," I said. I blushed a little, feeling the touch of the other Martian who held my hand.

"I'm Oscarette," added the other Martian.

"A Martian, too?" Hodar asked.

Oscarette nodded and fluttered her tulip nose demurely. I knew instantly that the newcomer was a lady Martian. Doing things demurely with our noses is something which only lady Martians can do.

"She's a she," I muttered weakly.

Hodar gulped. "I thought she was you, Oscar. I met her outside when I came up with the mountaineers. She said there was trouble inside the house."

With a lady Martian around, I recovered quickly and was soon on my feet, though still holding Oscarette's

hand. I felt as though I were walking on balloons. "How'd you get to Earth?" I asked her.

She made a delicate series of odors.

"No," I explained, "you must talk in sounds for these Earthmen."

Oscarette smiled lovably and lowered her lids apologetically for Hodar. Both Hodar and I held our breath, half fearing that some other magician had pulled her from a top hat. If it could happen twice, it might occur every time someone put on a show of magic.

"I don't know how I came," Oscarette replied in sounds. "Perhaps it was because I was interested in this Earth planet where everyone uses sound for language. I only remember listening to some radio - wave - interceptions from Earth. The waves grew stronger, then everything went black."

"But how did you arrive?"

"Everything remained black for a long while," Oscarette continued. "It seemed to be inside some metal cartridge. A very large one. Then someone with a leather bag opened the giant cartridge and I found myself on Earth. The Earthman who opened it, fainted."

"It wasn't a vehicle?" Hodar asked, relieved that the top hat theory was eliminated.

"No. It was stationary," Oscarette smiled again. "It had letters stamped on the outside metal. They read—U.S. MAIL."

"A mailbox!" Hodar wiped his brow and sat down abruptly. Just then Lana Frazier and Pine joined us. They were holding hands, just as Oscarette and I were. Pine had already discovered the detailed plan for draining the gold from Fort Knox on one of the Gold Concern men and he had called Major Starr at the Fort to warn him.

I looked at Oscarette again. "No wonder I had nostalgia so often," I mused. "I sensed Oscarette. She sent Frazier the Gold Concern code and the message signed, *Alienette*. She also brought the Concern's ledgers to our apartment in Washington."

"And the plot business to the Louisville papers," added Oscarette.

"But how'd you run into this? You were a complete stranger in the country," Hodar asked.

Oscarette let out a delicate responsive odor, then quickly corrected herself. "A gift," she said. "Didn't Oscar tell you? We Martian women have an unusually delicate sense of balance and mentality. It's like a tuning fork. When anything within our perception range is out of balance with its normal environment, we are jarred by it. While I was in the metal cartridge you call a mail box, I was sitting on a letter which jarred me. That was the code I sent to Secretary Frazier. The contents of the letter were out of harmony with everything else I sensed in America."

"What a homicide squad she'll make!" Bill Pine commented with amazed respect.

I, Oscar, should have felt a little insulted at this, but I wasn't. I was too preoccupied with Oscarette. She had pinched my hand for an instant and was now moving toward the French doors leading to a large outside verandah. Beyond them I could see the larch trees rippling in the soft Kentucky night.

Reaching the doors, Oscarette turned, sending me a glance that shot my blood pressure up. She stepped out on the verandah and somehow, I knew I was falling in love with the way her bunched Martian hips moved.

COMING
NEXT
MONTH

"WHEN FREEMEN SHALL STAND"
By NELSON S. BOND

GREAT
COMPLETE
NOVEL

ROMANCE OF THE ELEMENTS—MAGNESIUM



BRITISH FIRE FIGHTERS

LEARNED NOT TO DOUSE A MAGNESIUM INCENDIARY BOMB WITH A BUCKETFUL OF WATER... MAGNESIUM DEVOURS THE OXYGEN IN WATER. CAREFULLY SPREAD SAND IS A GOOD ANTIDOTE. ODDLY ENOUGH, SO IS WATER IF A FINE SPRAY.

PRINCIPAL MAGNESIUM USES IN WORLD WAR I WERE FOR TRACER BULLETS, ROCKETS, AND BOMBS.

PLANES THAT SPRING FROM THE OCEAN...!



MAGNESIUM IS ACTUALLY MINED FROM THE OCEAN TO PROVIDE PARTS FOR OUR FIGHTER AIRCRAFT...!

DOW CHEMICAL COMPANY'S NEW PLANT AT FREEPORT, TEXAS, SUCKS IN SEA WATER, EXTRACTS PRICELESS MAGNESIUM, THEN SPEWS OUT THE "SPENT WATER"!

ALMOST

HALF A TON OF MAGNESIUM GOES INTO ONE OF UNCLE SAM'S PLANES. MAGNESIUM IS LIGHTER THAN ALUMINUM; ITS ALLOYS ARE MACHINE-ABLE, TOUGH AND CAN TAKE IT. TYPICAL USES ARE FOR FRAMES; IN MOTOR CASTINGS AND WHEELS; FOR CRANK CASES. THEY TURN THE STUFF OUT IN SHEETS, RODS, TUBES AND CASTINGS.



EARLIEST

MENTION OF "MAGNESIUM" WAS POWDERED "MAGNESIA" ALBA THAT 18TH CENTURY ITALIAN STREET HAWKERS SOLD AS PANACEAS TO ROMAN CITIZENS.

1831, ANTOINE-ALEXANDRE-BRUTUS BUSSY HEATED IN A GLASS TUBE A CONCOCTION OF MAGNESIUM CHLORIDE AND POTASSIUM, RINSED OUT POTASSIUM CHLORIDE, GOT MAGNESIUM.



MAGNESIUM is number 12 in the International Table of Atomic Weights. Its symbol is Mg, and its atomic weight is 24.32. It is a silvery white metal. Its density is 1.74. It melts at 651°. Just below its melting point, it is ductile. When heated in air it burns brilliantly. It is used for flash-light powders, in fireworks, flares, as a high explosive ingredient, and as an alloy with aluminum in the production of airplane and frame castings. It is strong and light.

JERK the GIANT KILLER



"Come down, quick!" she said. "You've got to hide!"

Lefty Feep didn't intend to overwork himself, so he picked out the smallest bag of seeds to plant. But they grew the biggest crop of all!



by ROBERT BLOCH

I WAS sitting at my usual place in the usual booth of the usual restaurant the other night, when Lefty Feep made his unusual entrance.

At first I didn't notice anything out of the way about him. His face still looked like a fugitive from a pair of moose-horns. His suit was as gaudy as ever, and his necktie spilled over the front of his shirt like a two-bit sundae.

Then, as Mr. Feep slid into a seat across from me, I noticed the difference.

"No cuffs on your trousers," I remarked.

Lefty Feep nodded.

"From now on the only cuffs I get will be about the head," he grinned.

"And at that, I do not think she will

catch me. In fact I am sure of it."

"Who?" I asked.

Feep shrugged. I let it go at that. Some aspects of his private life won't stand close scrutiny. If he chooses to live as a one-man matrimonial bureau, it's his business.

"No," Feep continued. "No cuffs for me—on trousers or hands. This is the new Victory Suit."

"Looks like it's been through some pretty gory battles," I said. "Such a color scheme! It certainly isn't camouflaged."

Feep pouted.

"Do not criticize," he said. "I merely do my part for the war effort. I give up my cups, I bust my record of *The*

Japanese Sandman, and I spend my dough for bonds instead of blondes."

"Very patriotic."

"Oh, it is nothing." Feep sighed. "I only wish I can do something really fine, like my friend Jack does."

"Jack? Jack who?"

"I do not know his last name," said Lefty Feep. "In fact I do not even know if he is really named Jack. We just call him Jack because he never has any."

"Poverty-stricken, eh?" I observed. "But what can a poor man do that's really going to aid victory?"

A gleam kindled in Feep's eye. I shuddered, because I knew what was coming.

"It is quite a story," he murmured. "I know you will be happy to hear all about it."

"Sorry," I gasped. "I have a heavy date."

"Never mind how fat your girl friends are," snarled Feep. "This is such a tale as does not come your way every day in the week."

"Thank God!"

"What's that? Well, never mind. I will tell you the story just as I hear it from Jack when I run into him the other day."

Lefty Feep's tongue shot out of his mouth, and we were off. Way, way off.

THIS guy Jack is what you might call a very down and out personality. He is down because he is only five feet tall and he is generally out about two hundred dollars to the bookies.

About a year ago he gets so far out that he is living in the suburbs—Pennsylvania, in fact. Maybe he goes there for the cool climate, because it is pretty hot for him around town.

The next time I see him Jack tells me he gets married. This does not surprise me, because Jack always has a

soft spot for women—in his head.

The dame he hitches up with is in the neighborhood of six feet tall, which is quite a neighborhood to be in for a guy of Jack's stature. In addition she is built along the lines that Longfellow thinks of when he writes *The Village Blacksmith*.

But it turns out she owns a little farm in the Pennsylvania hills, and so that is where Jack now lives.

Just about this time the war breaks and everybody is talking about the defense effort. Jack is very patriotic, like I say. He is willing to do his part. In no time at all, he drives into one of the mining towns around there, steps up to the employment office, and gets his wife a job in the mills.

The war comes closer, and even this is not enough for Jack. He goes to another mill and gets his wife a night-shift job as well.

"We must work night and day," he tells me. And then a star-spangled gleam comes into his eye, and he says, "My only regret is that I have but one wife to give to my country."

So you see how it is with Jack. His wife goes to work and he stays home and tends to the farm. Not a day passes but he is doing something to brighten up the place—like carving his initials in a tree, very fancy, or decorating the porch with some beautiful fishing flies. A great fellow to brighten up the place is Jack—in fact he is almost always lit up.

For some reason or other, dames being funny like they are, this does not altogether please his partner in matrimony.

One morning she comes home from the night shift in order to cook the meals before she goes back to work on the day shift, and she is feeling very cranky. It seems that Jack cooks up some overtime for her at another plant.

"LISTEN you lazy bum," she says—it pains me to use such vulgar language, but that is the way this coarse woman phrases it—"I want you to do some work around this place. Here I am, day and night, working my fingers to the bone over a hot blast-furnace, and you sit around the house and loaf. You do not even sew the buttons on my overalls. What kind of a husband are you, anyway, you bum?"

In order that Jack does not miss any of this lecture she picks him up and holds his ear next to her mouth. Now she drops him down on the floor again in such a rude fashion that Jack cannot even answer her last \$64 question.

But this does not matter.

"Go upstairs and clean out the attic today," she says. "It is time for spring planting, and you will find all the seeds up there that Papa saves when he comes here from the old country."

"I should go out in the dirty fields and plant seeds?"

"By tomorrow morning one thing or the other will be planted—the seeds or you," says his wife.

And she grabs up her lunch pail and storms out.

So poor Jack picks himself up off the floor and hauls his hips way up to the attic. Of course, after such a walk, he has to sit down and rest a while. Which he does, stretching out on all the sacks of seeds up there.

He lies there looking at all the big bags, and the more he looks the more discouraged he gets. Some of them weigh fifty or a hundred pounds. And he cannot imagine himself carrying a hundred pound sack a mile out into the fields and then dumping it.

You see Jack is not a farmer, he just bets like one. And he does not understand the first thing about crops like the local yokels do. He is strictly an uptown boy, and the only way he knows

how to raise corn is in a bottle.

So he is very discouraged, but when he thinks about his wife he is even more discouraged. Finally he gets up and starts to haul the bags around. He is looking for the smallest sack he can find.

He stirs up a lot of dust—because these things are up in the attic now for many a year, ever since papa dies after coming from the old country. But in the middle of his wheezes and sneezes, Jack finds a very tiny leather pouch, way at the bottom of the piles.

He figures at first maybe it is only tobacco, but when he shakes it he knows it is seeds all right.

"That's for me," he decides. He puts it in his pocket and goes downstairs.

ON THE way down he accidentally finds some very nice fishing tackle in the closet next to the stairs, and he figures he might as well stop by the creek on his way to plant the seeds.

Well, one thing leads to another, and one road leads to the creek, and then one fish leads to another. So when Jack sits up and takes notice, it is after dark.

His wife will be coming home from the day shift and making supper before going back on the night shift. So Jack realizes he must get back to the house in order to grab some grub.

He gallops across the fields and then he remembers the seeds. It is too dark to see, and too late to waste time. He stops, scuffs a little hole in the ground with his fishing rod, and pours a handful of seeds into it.

At least this gives him the old alibi that he actually does some planting today. So he puts the rest of the seeds back in the pouch and trots home.

When his wife asks him if he engages in any agriculture, he answers yes. So she goes to work that night very happy

because Jack reforms this way. And Jack goes to bed very happy for the same reason.

The next morning, when the Happy Farmer gets up, he forgets all about it. Today he figures on going back to the creek, because the fish are biting faster than a crowd of relatives at Thanksgiving dinner.

Right after breakfast he tackles his tackle and does a sneak to the creek.

On the way he crosses over the fields again. At least, he crosses part way.

But he does not get any farther. Because right smack in the middle of the last field, down away in the valley where it is hidden from the house and road, is this plant.

When Jack sees it, his lower jaw drops so far he can rest his shoes on it.

The plant just sticks right up out of the ground. How far is hard to tell, because Jack cannot see the top of it. It is all made of green stalks, but it is not a tree. Jack looks up to see if he can notice branches, but all he sees is clouds.

It is a sort of a horticultural Empire State Building, if you know what I mean, and if you do please tell me.

ANYHOW, such a sight in a bare field is very unusual. Jack pats his hip, feels that the flask is still full, and pinches himself to find that he is still awake. He takes another look.

"What kind of seeds do I plant, anyhow?" he wonders. "Possibly they come from some mail-order catalogue. That is the only place where things grow so big."

The more he looks at the big tall stalks on the plant, the hotter he gets to find out what it is.

"Maybe if I shinny up a ways I can see the top and find out if this is a plant for peas, or potatotes, or rhubarb," he decides.

So Jack drops his fishing tackle and grabs hold of a big tough stalk and boosts himself up. He climbs very easily, because there is plenty to hang on to. Before he notices it, he is way up out of this world, and the air is getting thin. But still he is not at the top.

He climbs a little higher, stopping now and then to rest. The further he goes, the more anxious he gets to figure out what kind of a vegetable he raises.

Pretty soon he is so high he is afraid to look down at the ground. But he is now very far away from the good earth.

This is certain, because he is now getting quite damp from tangling with a cloud.

A minute later he is damp inside as well as outside, from tangling with his flask. But he needs his courage, where he is.

Soon there are clouds all around him. He has to take another nip. He climbs some more, and gets scared finally. He wants very much to get down now, but he cannot see his feet any more. There is nothing to do but keep climbing up.

Which he does, hauling away with his hands until he gets them blistered, and hauling away at the flask until his lips get blistered.

"I am thankful for one thing," he mutters. "Imagine how big this thing grows if I put fertilizer on it last night."

ALL at once the clouds start to thin away. He goes about the distance of the Washington Monument and he is in the open. In fact, he is reaching the top of the plant.

Only the top is not exactly what he expects to see. There is no raw vegetable dinner waiting up there. No beets, no succotash, no cauliflowers, no tomatoes, no spinach.

Instead, the top of the plant goes right through a hole in the clouds, and when Jack crawls through this hole he

is on solid ground!

"So this is China," says Jack, getting a little mixed up in his geography—to say nothing of the flask. But there he is, and very glad to be standing on some firmer terra, too.

He looks around. The scenery is nothing much—just country, with a lot of hills. And there is a path running along a ways off.

When he gets his breath back in his lungs and his cork back in the bottle, he is about as high as the scenery. He decides he might as well amble down this path and see what the score is.

So he walks along. Not exactly in a straight line, but he gets places.

Before you know it, or he knows it, for that matter, he is going up the path to a big stone apartment house on a hill. At least it looks like an apartment house to Jack, but when he gets a closer glimmer at the turrets and all, he knows it is nothing but a castle. A genuine castle, stuck right out here in the lonely hills!

Jack knows that there is only one explanation for a castle standing out on a country road—it must be a filling station.

So he footsies up to the door, wondering where the gasoline pumps are.

The door is open, and all at once he notices somebody is standing there in the entrance.

This turns out to be nothing less than a very pretty filet of femininity—a little red-headed ginch, with enough curves to strike out DiMaggio.

"Greetings," says the ginch, just as if Jack was expected. "Who art thou and from whence dost thou hail?"

Jack figures he is getting the old double-talk, see? But he is a very hep number, and always ready with a line.

"Why, I am a traveling salesman," he says. "And might you be the farmer's daughter?"

"I know no villiens, churls, nor peasantry," the ginch comes back. "I am the Lady Imogene, and this is the fief of my husband. And what," she coos, "might a traveling salesman be?"

"You don't know?" says Jack. "Well, well—"

He gives this Imogene ginch the old eye. And she smiles right back in a way which tells Jack that her husband isn't home. Probably out tending to his fiefs, or something.

WHICH suits Jack perfectly. In no time at all, he is inside this joint. It turns out to be a real castle, with sure-enough stone walls.

The whole place is terrifically big, like a downtown movie lobby, but what impresses Jack most is the size of all the furniture in it. The chairs are almost twenty feet high, and the tables even higher.

"Who is this husband of yours, King Kong?" he asks.

"No. He is King Glimorgus," answers Imogene.

"Sounds like a dandruff-remover," says Jack. And the ginch giggles.

She is throwing off plenty of smiles and such, and shows Jack around the joint very sweetly.

"I am glad you are here," she confesses. "I am so lonely."

"What does old Glimorgus do for a living?" asks Jack.

"Verily, he is a cattle tender."

"You mean he is out all day taking care of his herds?"

"Not exactly," simpers the ginch Imogene. "It is other people's cattle that he takes care of. Also he is a renowned sheep-raiser. He raises them from other people's land and carries them here."

"In other words, this husband of yours is no better than a thief," says Jack.

Imogene turns pale.

"Prithee, I implore you not to speak thusly in his presence. Such gibes make him exceedingly furious. And when he is furious, he is apt to become very angry. And being angry makes him mad."

"What you are trying to tell me is that he has a bad temper. I get it," says Jack. "Well, I do not wish to tangle with this cowboy husband of yours anyway. I would just as soon stay a stranger to this Lone Ranger."

"I grieve to hear you speak thusly, for King Glimorgus would like you."

"You don't say?"

"Verily. He likes men."

"He does, eh?"

"Yes—with a little salt and pepper. Some he likes roasted and basted. Others he likes raw. Lean as you are, methinks he wouldst relish you in a fricassee."

Jack gulps.

"Pardon me, I got to catch the Chat-tanooga choo-choo," he gasps, diving for the door.

BUT Imogene grabs his arm.

"Tarry a while," she suggests. "I do not expect him for many an hour. And I promise, I shall not permit him to eat you." Here she gives out with another dreamy smile, and Jack wavers a little.

"Speaking of food," Imogene goes on, "Methinks that after your travels you might be hungry. Wouldst do with a roast duck or two?"

"Wouldst do plenty," says Jack. "Lead me to it." Because he is really strictly from hunger.

So he follows the red-head into the kitchen, which is a huge place like all the other rooms. There is a terrific stone oven in the middle, and next to it stands an oversized table and some big chairs.

The ginch Imogene helps Jack climb up into one of these seats, and he sits there looking like a brat in a high-chair while she fusses around the oven with a couple quackers she is going to roast for him.

Jack is plenty curious to find out more about this setup, which strikes him as a little unusual.

"Isn't it a little trying to live with this Man Mountain Dean?" he asks.

"I fail to comprehend."

"I mean, aren't you afraid of living with Hannibal the Cannibal?"

"You mean King Glimorgus, my husband?" laughs the ginch. "But pray what must I fear?"

"Well, you tell me about his slightly unusual diet, and I figure maybe he will gobble you up between meals."

Imogene smiles and shakes her head.

"He needs me to cook for him," she explains. "Truly, were I gone, the servant problem here wouldst be most vexing."

"I can understand that all right," Jack agrees. "But still, if he is such a big brute like you say, it is a wonder he does not beat up on you all the time."

Imogene looks a little frightened.

"Let us not speak of that," she says. "Often do I wish to be free of him, but these is no way." Her smile turns on again. "Verily, it was my hope when you came here that perhaps you might be the champion who could rescue me."

She comes over to Jack and waves the duck under his nose, very temptingly, and how can he resist?

He gets up on his chair and pounds himself on the chest.

"You got the right idea there, baby," he says. "I'm going to do just that. When I set my peepers on you I say there is a little number that is too classy to be cooped up with an oversized cattle-thief like this Glimorgus."

And when that big tramp shows up I'm going to—"

WHAT Jack intends to do is never settled. Because all at once the big tramp shows up.

Merely the big tramp of feet, but that is enough. He can hear the feet just outside, and they are pounding along like a couple of twenty-ton tanks. Standing on the chair as he is, he can just see outside the window when a head passes. One look at the size of that head and Jack changes his mind.

"Here he comes!" he yells. "Hide me somewhere, quick!"

Imogene looks around wildly.

"Here—do you climb into the oven," she suggests.

"Do I? And how!" Jack dives off the chair and runs to the big stone oven. He can hardly reach up to the door and it takes a lot of effort to get it open, but the sound of those huge feet echoing through the house is all the encouragement he needs.

"Boost me up," he whispers.

"I cannot."

Just then the problem is settled. Because a big hand sticks itself around the kitchen door. Jack takes one look and then gives a flying jump up into the oven. He slams the door just in time as the giant walks into the room.

He lies there in the dark, does Jack, squinting through the air-holes in the oven door. And there is certainly plenty for him to see.

Plenty of the giant, anyway. Because this King Glimorgus turns out to be thirty feet tall. He is so big he could black Jack's eyes for him with his knees. And Jack does not wish to give him such an opportunity, so he looks very quietly from behind the oven door.

The giant comes in and stands there for a minute. He does not shake

hands with his wife, either—because he is carrying a calf under each arm. He sort of swings the calves around like they were chickens and then tosses them down on the table.

"I brought a little snack for lunch," he announces. Then he grabs Imogene up and kisses her.

This makes Jack shudder. The idea of anyone having to come close to that great big face is very unpleasant. He has a tremendous black beard, and kissing him must be like falling into a pile of bushes face-first.

But Imogene smiles, being used to it, and the giant smiles back. His smile is like grim death, because he has teeth as big as tombstones.

HE SETS Imogene down very carefully, like a doll, and then he yawns. This isn't so bad, even if it does make all the dishes rattle and the clock on the wall stops dead.

"Anything happen?" he asks, in a voice like a sick foghorn.

"Naught, my lord," says Imogene.

"Guess I'll eat then," the giant decides.

"Very well."

"Roast these calves for me," says the giant.

Jack gulps. Imogene turns pale.

"Just shove them in the oven under a hot fire," the giant orders.

"But—but my lord—"

"Eh?"

"You know it is not wise for you to indulge in roast meat during the mid-day. Remember the advice of the leech—cooked meat is bad for the pressure of the blood."

"Is that so?"

"Of course." Imogene begins to coax. She climbs up on the giant's lap and strokes his forehead—which is like running your hand across a washboard.

"You are so delicate, my lord. So

anemic. You must guard your health. You are not strong."

This is fine talk to hand somebody who looks like the big brother of Gargantua the Gorilla, but it works with the giant.

"Perhaps you are right, my little pet," he says. "I do not feel my best. In fact I am not even very hungry. So I will just eat those two calves raw."

Jack breathes a sigh of relief as the giant begins to pick at his food. He merely toys with it, dabbles around—in fact it takes him nearly ten minutes to eat the two calves. Just an invalid's diet.

Imogene bustles around, bringing him salt and pepper, and rolling out a pony of ale for an appetizer. She is doing her best to keep King Glimorgus from noticing anything wrong.

But all at once he holds up the leg of a calf and turns his head.

"I smell something," he says. This time his voice is so loud that the clock on the wall falls off completely.

"What do you mean?" quavers the little ginch.

"Aha!" yells the giant. "I thought so!"

"Thought what?"

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum

I smell the blood

Of an Englishman."

This is bad poetry, but the thought behind it is worse. At least, to Jack. Because he is not an Englishman, but Irish, and this is quite an insult, to say the least.

TO SAY the most, if the giant finds Jack it is curtains. So he trembles inside the oven. The giant gets up.

"Are you hiding a man in this castle?" he booms.

"Verily, you jest," trembles Imogene.

"But I smell one."

"Perchance you suffer from a cold

in the head."

"I know a man when I smell him," insists the giant. "And when I smell him I find him. And when I find him—I eat him!"

Jack begins to feel like a hunk of sandwich meat already.

The giant is striding back and forth across the room.

"Where is he?" he yells. "Show him to me and I'll tear him limb from limb! I'll clean his wishbone and use it for a toothpick."

"The use of toothpicks is vulgar," Imogene says. "And you are mistaken, my lord. That is no man you smell—merely the hen."

"Hen? What hen?"

"Why, the marvelous hen I purchased from the itinerant wizard who chanced by this morning."

"You bought a hen? Honestly, you women are all alike," grumbles the giant. "Every damned peddler that comes along, you have to buy something—"

"Wait until you see it," says the ginch. "Truly, it can perform a miraculous feat."

She runs out into the other room and brings back a live chicken. It is an ordinary-looking white bird and the giant scowls at it.

"I see nothing remarkable in this fowl," he sneers.

"Ah, but there is something remarkable in it. And wait until it comes out."

She sets the hen down on the table and strokes it. It clucks a little.

"Lay!" she says to the chicken. "Lay."

The chicken squawks. All at once it sits up. Imogene lifts it off the table. Underneath the chicken is an egg. An egg of solid gold!

"Is not this a remarkable thing to find in a chicken?" she asks.

"It lays golden eggs, does it? And

all you must do is tell it that want one?"

"Merely stroke its back and command it to lay."

So King Glimorgus the giant sits down and begins to stroke the chicken and yell, "Lay!" And the eggs pour out.

"Eighteen carats!" chuckles the giant. "Nice, grade-A size, too. My dear, all is forgiven."

He scoops up a pile of golden golf-balls and gets up.

"I shall take these down to have them assayed," he says. "Mind you, guard the hen well until I return."

And he tramps off.

A COUPLE minutes later, Jack crawls out of the oven.

"Nice work," he tells Imogene. "You saved my life. Now I must beat it before my wife beats me."

"You are wed?" says Imogene. Her face falls. "I am sorry. For I was of a mind that you should stay here with me and console me."

"A very noble idea," Jack answers. "In fact, nothing suits me better. But pretty soon your husband comes back and starts poking his big nose around again, so I figure I will keep out of his way. And my wife is not quite so big, but she is just as tough."

So Jack heads for the door with Imogene after him.

"Perchance you will return?" she asks.

"Who can tell?"

"If not," sighs the ginch, "I will bestow a parting gift. Take this hen."

And she gives him the hen that lays the golden eggs.

"A very sweet gesture," Jack says. "And thank you for giving me the bird."

He leaves Imogene then and puts the castle behind him. Jack makes time on the path now with the hen under his arm. He looks around to see that the

coast is clear, and when he comes to the plant sticking through the ground, he slides down through the hole and begins to climb.

Going down doesn't take so much time. He manages to slide quite a bit of the way, and he is very willing to hurry.

He figures on getting home and doing some planting before his wife arrives. He wants to plant seeds, and he also wants to plant this remarkable chicken where she won't find it.

Sliding down, he does his best to figure out this adventure he has.

The whole thing reminds him of a yarn he reads in a book when he is a tiny tot—a little epic entitled *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In fact, this seems to be almost a duplicate.

His name is Jack; and he finds some seeds and plants them, and they grow. He plants them in the dark, but now he is almost sure they are beans. The stalk comes up, he climbs it, and there he is with this giant. The giant even talks like the book, with his hi-de-ho about sniffing the corpuscles of a British subject.

And now Jack gets a hen that lays nuggets. It all adds up, somehow.

SO JACK hits the earth feeling pretty pleased with himself. He hops back to the farmhouse and sticks the chicken away in the back of the hencoop.

Then he grabs up a sack of corn and goes out to plant it. He is so happy he even feels like doing a little work, and by supper time he has the satisfaction of spreading more corn than a politician does at election time.

He heads for the house, very happy. His wife is all smiles when she sees he is working.

"I am glad you reform, you bum," she greets him. "I fix an extra nice supper for you."

Which it is.

But right in the middle of the meal, Jack stares down at his plate.

"Where do you get this lovely fried chicken, darling?" he asks.

She smiles at him.

"Who do you ask, you naughty boy? From the hencoop, of course."

"The hencoop—"

"Certainly." She wags her finger at him. "You are so thoughtful to go and steal one of the neighbor's chickens for me."

"Neighbors—"

"But of course, just like a man, you do not realize they will recognize it if it is running around in our yard. So I kill it and fry it."

"You fry the chicken I put in the hencoop?"

"Of course."

And all at once Jack does not like his fried chicken any more. In fact he loses his appetite. So his wife has to take the rest of the chicken in her lunch pail when she goes off to work on the night shift.

Jack lies in bed thinking about what a rotten deal he gets. Here he has a chicken that can lay golden eggs—he has a potential Fort Knox right in his own back yard—and he loses it. It is enough to get anybody up in the air.

And that, finally, is where he decides to go.

There is nothing else to do, after such a disappointment, but to climb the beanstalk again tomorrow and see if he can lay his hands on another hunk of this precious poultry.

He can hardly wait. For the first time in years he is up at dawn and running out into the field in the valley where the beanstalk stands.

Sure enough, it is still there, and when Jack gets there he is far from still. He boosts himself up hand over hand and makes like a monkey.

PRETTY soon he is high and dry, not bringing a flask with him this trip. The going is tough, and for a minute Jack gets a bad attack of qualms.

After all, why should he risk his neck again by playing around with a thirty-foot bozo whose idea of a complete hamburger dinner would be Jack with a bottle of ketchup poured over him?

So Jack stops to think things over. And he looks down at the ground. It is so far away that he gets the shakes just thinking about his position on the beanstalk, and there is nothing to do but look up again—and climb some more.

In a little while he is up in the clouds again, looking for silver linings. But all he gets is water on the knee trying to wade through the dampness. So Jack climbs as fast as he can, to get through the rain, and shortly he is crawling through the hole at the top of the beanstalk.

He is on the path in the hills once more, and this time he knows his way. He walks along very slowly, looking to see if he can notice the giant's footprints in the dust. But there is no mark of any size 44 brogans treading this way, so he skips along until he comes to the big stone castle.

The door is still open, and Imogene is standing there. When she sees Jack she smiles and tucks up her pretty red hair.

"I am so glad you are back," she says. "I wight you wish to console me?"

"Wight you are," says Jack, who is catching on fast to her brand of conversation.

"Shall we step inside?" asks Imogene.

"Is Shorty home?" Jack comes back.

"King Glimorgus?" she giggles.

"Nay, he is out hunting."

"Deer?"

"Nay—you."

"Me?"

"Verily. He suspects the presence of a stranger about. It is his belief that you are responsible for the disappearance of his chicken, and he will not rest until he finds you."

"If he finds me, I will not rest," says Jack. "Maybe I better jam on the scram."

Imogene's pretty blue eyes cloud up and look like rain. She sighs.

"You wouldst desert me?" she wails. "And here it is my hope that you are a gallant champion come to rescue me from that miserable ogre! If I were only free again to live as other women, instead of being cooped up here with that monstrous tyrant—oh, I should do anything to reward the noble rescuer who saves me!"

"Anything?" says Jack.

"Anything," sighs Imogene.

WELL, this is a pretty big proposition, and Jack knows it. So he takes his time thinking it over. Then he makes up his mind.

"Would you get me a drink?" he asks.

"Surely—we have mead and ale in plenty! Come with me into the castle."

So Jack wanders into the castle again. He keeps his eyes open this time, because he is really on the lookout for another hen to grab. If he can only find an 18-carat chicken or a platinum-producing pullet he is satisfied to run a few risks.

But the castle rooms are empty, and when they come to the kitchen he gets his drink and sits down on the floor—not having a stepladder handy to climb up to the table.

Then he decides to pump Imogene for information.

"Do I hear you mention raising that chicken from a gizzard?" he asks her.

"No. I purchase it from a wizard,"

she answers.

"Do you suppose he has any more fowl like that?" says Jack. "I am in the market for another chicken, or maybe a duck that lays a few bucks."

"That is the only chicken of its kind, he tells me."

"What?" moans Jack, disappointed. "No turkeys? No ostriches?"

She shakes her head. Then she smiles.

"But wait until your eyes rest on the purchase of today," she tells him. "This is indeed a wondrous bargain. 'Twill interest you greatly."

"Let's have a squint," Jack suggests.

But he does not get a squint. He gets a scrunch. The scrunch-scrunch of the giant's feet outside the castle. King Glimorgus is coming home.

"Here he comes," yells Jack. "Open the oven and start in shoving!"

"But you were to rescue me—"

"How can I rescue you unless I rescue myself first?" Jack argues, running across the big kitchen tiles. "I got to hide safe to save my hide."

BUT when they get to the oven and Jack reaches up, the door is stuck. And so is he, because he can hear the giant coming into the front hall.

"Now where?" Jack yells.

"Here—lift yourself into the bread-box." Imogene points out the big canister on the floor. So Jack pops off the cover and pops inside.

Meanwhile, the giant is coming up like thunder through the house. Jack tips the lid a little to see what's going on.

King Glimorgus stamps into the room, with a very nasty look spread all over his face.

"Don't tell me," he yells, before Imogene can open her mouth. "I can sniff him a mile off—the paltry poultry pilferer."

He gives her the old leer and sneer

from ear to ear.

"It is in my mind to wring your pretty neck," he growls.

"But my lord—there is no one here. Seeing you approach, I have come to pour your tankard of ale."

And she offers him the drink she fixes for Jack.

"Ale—bah!" hollers the man higher up. "There is but one drink for me—the blood of that thieving rogue!"

"I do not see him."

"Use your nose," grunts the ogre. And he goes off into his poetry hour again, in a voice that would melt rocks.

*"Fee Fi Fo Fum
I smell the blood
Of an Englishman!
Be he alive
Or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones
To make my bread."*

Jack lies in the breadbox and almost shakes the lid off.

"Why doesn't he try some of that new enriched bread?" he grumbles to himself. "A little vitamin B₁ is all right. Why does he need my bones in the stuff?"

But this is not a question to ask any thirty-foot giant, so Jack keeps strictly from silent.

"He's hiding here," the giant yells. "Maybe in that oven!" And he strides over to the oven door, yanking it open. The door is still stuck, but this does not stop the ogre. He wrenches the door off and looks in.

OF COURSE the oven is empty.

"I'll search everywhere," yells King Glimorgus. But Imogene pouts and tugs at his knees.

"You'll spoil my surprise," she says. "You will find its hiding place."

"Surprise? What surprise?"

"The surprise I bought from the wizard today."

"He here again?" But the giant looks interested.

"This item is truly rare," says Imogene. "Do you be seated, whilst I bring it to you."

She scampers off and comes back in a minute carrying a lot of wires under her arm.

"What manner of trash is this?"

"A harp, my lord. A wonderful harp."

"Harp? I don't play a harp."

"No need to play it. It plays itself."

"Plays itself?"

"That is the marvel of its minstrelsy. Merely command it to play, my lord."

So Imogene sets the harp down on the table and the giant sits down and gawks at it for a minute. Then he says, "Play!"

And the harp plays.

Jack cannot believe his peeping eyes. The strings on the harp move and a tune comes out. Of course it is not anything that is leading the hit parade, but the stuff makes music.

And the giant begins to smile.

When the chorus is over he says, "Play," again, and the harps swings out. Pretty soon there is quite a jam session going on, in a corny sort of way. The giant taps the table with his fingers—very gentle, so as not to splinter it to bits—and the harp goes through its repertoire. It is better than a juke box, because you don't have to put nickels in it.

After a while it starts playing some real soft stuff—regular slumber music. And in no time at all, the giant is snoring. In fact he snores so loud it drowns out the music, and the harp shuts up.

SO THERE is the giant, slumped over the table fast asleep. As soon as she sees it is safe, Imogene gives Jack the old high-sign and he climbs out of the breadbox.

"Very glad to get out of there," he whispers. "Too crowded. Loaves of bread jamming my knees and rolls all over my waist. I do not mind getting a bun on, but not on my head."

"Quickly," pants Imogene. "He sleeps now. You must go."

"Mind if I take a souvenir?" asks Jack, pointing at the harp.

"Very well."

So Jack tiptoes over to the table, reaches up, and grabs hold of the harp.

The result is very startling. Because the harp sort of tugs back on him and then it plunks out some sounds that resemble words.

"Help—Master—Help—"

Jack grabs it under his coat to stifle the noise, but too late. The giant opens his eyes and sits up.

"So!" howls the ogre. "There you are—you chicken-hearted chicken thief!"

Jack is on the spot. In fact he will be a spot if the giant's foot ever smashes down on him.

He thinks fast.

"Yes, I am the yegg who snatches your eggs," he admits. "And now I am taking your harp. So what are you going to do about it, Gus?"

King Glimorgus makes a lunge for him. This is just what Jack wants, because he runs right between the giant's legs. Glimorgus turns around, but Jack is scampering down the hall, with the harp tucked inside his coat.

"Stop thief!" yells the harp.

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum," yells the giant.

"Nuts to you, brother," remarks Jack running very sincerely.

But the giant is right behind him.

Jack races out of the castle and down the trail, but Glimorgus stomps along right after him. He has to run stooped over with his hands out, because if he takes too much of a stride his legs pass right over Jack and he can not see to

grab him.

Jack weaves and ducks but keeps to the trail. And the giant's hands come scooping down behind him in the dust, trying to grab hold.

Jack spies the hole and the top of the beanstalk and dives for it. He starts climbing down.

Then he starts sliding down.

Because the giant comes right after him!

HE TEARS away an acre or so of ground around the hole and jumps down on the stalk. The whole thing trembles at the terrific weight, and the beanstalk shakes and sways, but Jack does not stop. He slides for very dear life—his life.

Right down through the cloud layers he goes, skinning his hands and knees. Beans pop all around his head, but he does not hesitate. The giant bellows up above, and then he seems to get stuck in the fog from the clouds. Jack can hear him Fee-ing and Fi-ing, and when he comes down closer to the ground Jack hears the thunder of his Fo-ing and Fum-ing.

Then Jack hits solid earth. He is panting and gasping, but he is also planning and grasping.

"If this is really such a beanstalk like in the story," he quavers, "then there is only one thing I need to do. I must chop down the beanstalk with my little hatchet."

This is a very cheerful idea. But Jack is not George Washington.

I cannot tell a lie. He has no hatchet!

So there is Jack, staring up the shaking beanstalk, waiting while the giant's feet start sticking out from the clouds. He is coming down fast. The stalk is wobbly, but it is not falling. And there is not a hatchet in sight!

Jack grabs at himself and beats his

chest. Then he hits it.

The harp!

He yanks it out.

"Hey—leggo of me!" yells the harp, in a very impolite manner.

But Jack has no time to be polite. He rips the wood away from the harp and grabs a handful of loose wires. He twists them together at the ends.

Then he kneels down and saws away at the base of the beanstalk. The wire is sharp. It cuts.

Now the giant's knees are visible. And Jack hears his voice out of the clouds.

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum

Ready or not—

Here I come!"

Jack saws away. And the beanstalk gives. He looks up and yells.

"Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum

Here you go,

You oversized bum!"

AND that is just what happens. The beanstalk suddenly snaps with a twang and a bang. The whole stalk swings free and a gust of wind lifts it straight up in the air.

From up above, Jack hears the giant giving what the poets call one hell of a yell. But it is too late. The beanstalk shoots up through the clouds and disappears. The field is empty. There is nothing left.

So Jack goes back home to his wife.

"After all," he figures. "Maybe it is best things happen like this.

"The giant is gone, and that means I really rescue Imogene from him, and make good my promise.

"It is nice to have a lot of golden eggs, but the government arrests you if you keep over \$100 in gold on you.

"A harp that plays itself is also fine—but what has it got that a portable radio hasn't got?"

Such is the story Jack tells me when

he comes to town a couple days later. His wife thinks he is a jerk for not doing the planting like he promises, but Jack has plans. He tells me the plans, too, and he is very happy about the whole thing. Remarkable, is it not?

LEFTY Feep sat back and balanced an olive on his tongue.

I leaned forward and exploded.

"It's not remarkable—it's downright screwy! I have never heard such exaggerations in all my life."

Feep looked hurt.

"Do not say such a thing," he snapped. "It may be that I lie a little from time to time, but I never exaggerate!"

"But Lefty—do you actually expect me to believe that the Jack and the Beanstalk fable happened here in real life?"

Feep shrugged.

"Who can tell? Jack's wife says the beans are very old when her Papa brings them over to this country."

"Nuts to beans," I sighed. "But there's one thing that really puzzles me."

"Name it and you can have it."

"In the fable, the stalk falls down, and the giant gets killed. In your story, it flies up in the air. That isn't much to believe. In fact, it is too much to believe it!"

Lefty looked injured, even a trifle hurt.

"It only shows your scientific ignorance," he snapped. "The giant is closer to China than he is to me, so he falls up."

"Up?"

"Sure. Gravity, you dope!"

I nodded slowly, because I could see he was right there. But another thing bothers me. I mention it.

"When you started out, you told me

that this Jack was making such a wonderful contribution to the war effort. And nothing in your story even hints at such a thing."

"Oh, that." Feep smiled. "I forget that part. What Jack does for the war effort is something he tells me the other day. Remember, I mention he has plans."

"So?"

"The night Jack plants the bean-

stalk he uses only a couple of beans. He still has a lot left over in the pouch he finds."

"Well?"

Feep shrugged again. His smile broadened.

"Very simple. Jack is going back to the farm right now. He is going to plant the rest of those beans in a Victory Garden."

THE END

SPARE PARTS FOR HUMAN BODY

MANY people are permanently handicapped in life when they lose an ear or their nose through a disease, accident, or necessary operation. This facial mar often prevents an otherwise capable and desirable person from getting a job. However, this condition is no longer necessary. Patients at the famous Mayo Clinic have had lost noses and ears replaced with ones made from latex, the pre-vulcanized liquid rubber, which look exactly like the real thing.

These noses can be held in place by attaching them to a spectacle frame or by pasting them on with a liquid adhesive solution. Some of the pa-

tients use their new noses or ears temporarily until they can have noses or ears made from their own skin and tissues by plastic surgery. Other patients of advanced age where plastic surgery is not feasible, keep their latex noses or ears permanently.

Latex, when correctly compounded and worked is about the best material yet discovered for making these spare parts. However, according to Dr. A. H. Bulbulion, the ideal material for artificial human facial replacements has not yet been found. Experimentation in this field will continue.

PROVES MAN IS GOD

A strange method of mind and body control, that leads to immense powers never before experienced, is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, F.R.G.S., well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often, with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

This startling method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country, rarely visited by outsiders, and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western world.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind-power, capable of surprising feats, from the delay of old age to the prolonging of youth, and the achievement of dazzling business and professional success. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized by a false idea of what we really are.

Most of us know that God is everywhere, but never realize that God cannot be everywhere without being also in us. And if He is in us, then all His wisdom, all His power — unlimited knowledge and infinite power — is likewise in us. If God is everywhere, then there is nothing but God, and we also are that — a completely successful human life being the expression of God in man. The Holy Spirit of the Bible is an actual living force in man, and through it we too can do "greater things than these." The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing our minds of the hypnotizing ideas which blind us to the vast power of this living force within us.



A nine-thousand word treatise, revealing the startling results of this system, is now being offered free to anyone who quickly sends his name and address. Write promptly to the address below, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

The Institute of Mentalphysics, Dept. A-67, 213 So. Hobart Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif.



Slowly a lovely girl began
to materialize in thin air.



The Devil's Lady

By CLARK SOUTH

Thompson was in a mess. To be haunted is bad enough, but when it's a ghost like this, embarrassment is the order of the day—or night!

"**A** GHOST! In your bedroom! Of all the crazy stories!" Miss Ruth Winslow commented with asperity. "No, Mr. Thompson, I can't solve that problem!"

She set down her cocktail glass on the tiny table with the finality of a Hitler edict.

"I'm the *Blade's* 'problem column' editor," she went on, her voice dripping vitriol as a soaked sponge drips water,

"not a— a—" Miss Winslow's lovely face wore a frown beneath the roots of her naturally golden hair as she struggled for a term descriptive of the situation. But her temper was soaring in exactly inverse ratio to the plummeting of her self-control. "Oh! Of all the silly—! Mr. Thompson, you are a despicable smart-aleck!"

Young Mr. Harold Thompson's harried, haggard, yet not unhandsome fea-

tures took on the woebegone aspect of a particularly mournful Saint Bernard.

"Honestly, Miss Winslow, you've got me wrong!" he protested plaintively. "I'm not—"

"You persuade me to break my rule against meeting people who write in to my column," Miss Winslow interrupted furiously. "You send me one heart-breaking letter after another until finally I agree to see you personally. And then what do you do?" The silky blonde curls tossed tempestuously. "You tell me a wild story about a female ghost who keeps you awake nights!" Her lips pursed angrily.

Other patrons of the secluded little cocktail lounge were looking around curiously now, their attention attracted by the girl's rising voice. Her tall companion made nervous, placatory gestures. "Please, Miss Winslow; not so loud. I can't help it if my story sounds crazy. It's still true." He sighed wearily, shook his head with the despair of a small manufacturer who has just lost his priority rating. "I guess it's no use. It's just too much to expect anyone to believe such a yarn. I wouldn't believe it myself unless I'd seen it." Then, with a sudden flash of spirit: "But it's still true!"

Miss Winslow's small, shapely foot tapped the floor with the grimly persistent beat of an angry metronome. "You mean you still have the impudence, the brass-bound nerve, to sit in that chair, look me in the eye, and tell me that . . . that . . . that fairy tale of yours is true?"

The harried young man leaned forward, every line and gesture bespeaking sincerity.

"I do!" he declared with the fervor and conviction of a missionary proselytizing a nearly-converted pagan. Drawing a deep breath, he began repeating his story:

"SHE says her name's Jezebel," he explained. "For nearly a month now she's been appearing in my room every night. She wants me to—"

The lovely Miss Winslow blushed. "Let's not go into that part of it," she broke in hastily.

Her companion nodded agreement. He tried unsuccessfully to smooth the corduroy road of worry wrinkles from his forehead. "All right. Well, anyway, she pops up every night right beside my bed. At first I figured she was some girl who lived in the rooming house. You know, trying to play a joke on me. But now"—he sighed—"I know it's not that."

Again the golden-haired problems-columnist interrupted. In spite of herself she found this strange tale fascinating her; it intrigued her news sense.

"How do you know it's not some joker?" she demanded.

"Oh, it can't be." Mr. Thompson was pitifully anxious to clear up the point: "You see, after she'd come a couple of times, I locked all the doors and windows. Then I sealed them, just to make sure. But she came just the same—"

Miss Winslow frowned.

"What about the lights? Ghosts are supposed to be afraid of lights."

"Not this one," the woebegone Mr. Thompson asserted with melancholy conviction. "I thought of the same thing. Only it doesn't work. She just narrows her eyes slowly, like this"—he demonstrated, with ludicrous results—"and shrugs her shoulders"—more demonstrating—"and says 'Our passion would light zee room far brighter zan zis feeble bulb, but if you want it, I don't mind.'" He shivered a little at the recollection, then added explanatorily: "She shows a little accent sometimes."

The *Blade's* lone female columnist

snickered a bit in spite of herself. "Put on that act for Lady Jezebel and you'll scare her away!" she suggested. Then, as an idea struck her: "But a ghost! If she's a ghost, what are you worrying about? They're immaterial. Incorporeal. Vaporous. Here you've been talking as if this creature was solid flesh and bone and blood—"

Again Mr. Thompson was firmly positive.

"She is!" he declared. "She's just as solid and real as any of us. A little lower body temperature, maybe—but —"

The lovely Miss Winslow raised an ironical eyebrow. It was young Mr. Thompson's turn to imitate a newly-painted barn.

"Well, I can't help it if she insists on trying to hug me, can I?" he muttered, face scarlet. And, breaking down: "Please, Miss Winslow, what am I going to do? There must be some way out. Surely you can think of an answer." He hesitated. "I've been reading your column ever since it started, and I've seen you solve so many people's problems that I figured mine would be duck soup for you."

THE *Blade's* gift to distraught readers shifted in her seat and meditated. Despite his worried preoccupation with his troubles, Mr. Thompson noted and definitely approved the above-mentioned shift. He found himself thinking that it displayed the lady's obvious and plentiful charms to even greater advantage than before. In fact, Mr. Thompson went so far as to wonder what his reaction to his nocturnal visitor would have been had she taken the form of a slender yet curvaceous blonde instead of a sultry brunette with a French accent.

"Mr. Thompson," Miss Winslow interrupted his thought stream, "I am go-

ing to take you at your word. I am going to believe what you have told me."

Young Mr. Thompson's grateful sigh was that of a condemned man pardoned as the guards are adjusting the noose around his neck.

"I knew it!" he breathed ecstatically. "Right from the start I had a feeling you could help me if you'd only put your mind to it. A premonition, almost—"

"Your problem," the young newspaperwoman reported in her best professional problem-solving tone, "is mental." She stabbed his worried brown eyes with her own sparkling blue optics. "You must stop worrying about this—this creature. Once she sees she's not making any headway, she'll quit bothering you."

Her companion shuffled his feet nervously under the table.

"It's not quite so simple as that, I don't think," he muttered in the uneasy voice of an apprentice lion tamer who, after one leg has been gnawed off at the knee, is told to go back into the cage and show that cat who's boss.

"Nonsense!" contradicted Miss Winslow loftily. "All you need to do is use your will-power. Pay no attention to the hussy!"

Mr. Thompson gulped.

"I still wish you'd come out and have a look at her before you make up your mind," he said doggedly.

The lady's lips compressed into a thin, irritated line. There was a certain curtness in her voice when she spoke. "Am I to understand that you're trying to lure me out to your room?"

Her companion squirmed like a man with the seven-year itch and no fingernails.

"I'm not trying to lure you anywhere," he announced plaintively. "All

I want you to do is to hide in my room and get a look at Jezebel. Bring someone along to wait outside, if you want to. But please come."

Miss Winslow eyed him for a long, silent minute. Mr. Thompson met her cool gaze with a pleading look that would have melted the heart of a Gestapo operative.

"All right," she said at last. "I'm a sap for agreeing, but I'll go with you."

A sigh of relief quivered through the other's lips.

"But I shall definitely bring someone else along to stand guard outside," the girl added. "So if you've got any ideas lurking in the back of your head, you'd better get rid of them, unless you feel qualified to argue them out with a nice, tough hoodlum from the *Blade's* circulation department!"

TOGETHER, the man and the girl crept up the stairs to his room. Outside, a husky gentleman named Mike stood guard, a spanner in one hip pocket, brass knuckles in the other.

"Miss Winslow, you'll never know how much I appreciate this," young Mr. Thompson declared jubilantly. "This thing's been driving me crazy. I've told a couple of my friends about it, and all they seem to be able to do is to laugh up their sleeves and tell me they hope my padded cell has a southern exposure." He hesitated. "In fact, my girl said last night that I didn't need to call her again 'til I got straightened out on it."

"Oh, that's too bad," murmured the young lady beside him. "But I'm sure everything will come out all right." And, to herself, while she crossed her fingers: "Or, at least I *hope* it comes out all right—for me, especially."

They paused in the hallway.

"You sneak in without turning the lights on and crawl under the bed," Mr.

Thompson whispered. "Then, in a couple of minutes, I'll come in just like I always do. I'll get ready for bed and turn in. Then we'll see what happens!" His brown eyes were alive with excitement.

Miss Winslow threw him the kind of glance that will be tendered Japanese peace missions in years to come.

"For both our sakes," she observed, "I hope this isn't some kind of a trick." For a moment she hesitated; then, coming to a decision, went on: "Because, in addition to Mike, I brought some more protection with me." She drew an ugly, vest-pocket size Walther 6.35 mm. automatic from her purse. "If anyone gets an urge to lay hands on me," she warned, "he'd better plan to bring along a bullet-proof vest."

Her tall young companion nodded and snapped off the hall light. Turning, the girl silently opened the door to his room. She slipped inside, closed it, and a moment later was ensconced under the bed.

There followed several minutes of black silence. Miss Winslow caught herself comparing her position to that of some hapless traveler awakening in Dracula's family vault. She meditated on the tall, good-looking young man who had hypnotized her into coming here, and wondered anxiously if the harried look in his brown eyes might not be the outward manifestation of homicidal mania. A little shiver ran through her at the thought. She tightened her grip on the Walther.

Then, from downstairs, came the sound of a door slamming, followed by approaching footsteps and the faint trill of someone whistling. The next instant the door opened and a light snapped on. Feet in maroon socks and black oxfords moved about the room, tweed pant-cuffs slapping against them.

A few minutes later, with a squeak-

ing as of many mice, the gentleman sat down on the bed and removed the shoes and socks. Sky-blue pajamas replaced the tweed trousers. Other noises—Miss Winslow took them to indicate evening ablutions—followed. The bed was thrown open. The light snapped off. Again the springs creaked and, with a sigh recognizable as coming from Mr. Thompson, the bed's occupant prepared for sleep.

UNDER the berth, the lovely Miss Winslow also sighed. Hers expressed the relief Daniel must have felt when the lions didn't jump. For the time being, she decided, her companion's explanation was holding up.

Seconds passed, and turned to minutes. The minutes, in turn, transformed themselves into sundry aches, cramps, and pains in various of Miss Winslow's joints. She began to realize at how terribly many points her body touched the floor—and that all of them hurt. She tried to shift about silently to a more comfortable position, but succeeded only in banging her chin and right elbow on the carpet-covered boards. It was a thin carpet. At last she gave up.

"This is certainly the worst wild goose chase since Henry Ford's peace ship, anyhow," she told herself with considerable irritation. "I'm getting out. Being problems editor certainly shouldn't force me to doom myself to lumbago at 24." She raised herself to all fours like an awkward puppy, somewhat painfully, and thrust her head out from under the bed.

Then she saw the light. It was a dim, greenish, phosphorescent glow, and it came from the far corner of the room. A five-and-a-half-foot-tall column of nebulosity, it hung straight up from the floor, almost as if it were a uniquely cohesive cloud of steam pour-

ing from a pipe. Even as the young newspaperwoman watched, a head seemed to form at its top.

Miss Winslow bit her tongue hard to keep from screaming. A battery of tattooing needles were injecting chills the length of her spine, and she could feel her hair rise and sway like Medusa's snakes.

The glowing head was definitely attractive in a sinister sort of way. Gleaming black hair framed a sensuously beautiful face, with darkly passionate eyes and full lips. The sight of those lips went far toward restoring Miss Winslow's self-confidence and poise. No lady had a mouth like that!

Now the head was growing a body. A Mae West torso, a hula dancer's hips, and long, sleek legs materialized—all garbed in the sketchiest of revealing wardrobes. Miss Winslow's lips pursed. She could understand why young Mr. Thompson had taken on that harried, haggard look, if this creature had been hanging around for a month!

Suddenly it dawned upon her that the strange female was staring straight at her. She'd forgotten to pull her head back beneath the bed!

"Zo!" cried the intruder, eyes flashing sparks. "W'at are you doing 'ere?"

FEELING somewhat embarrassed, Miss Winslow pulled herself from beneath the bed. Obviously any further attempt at concealment was useless.

At the same time, the also-embarrassed Mr. Thompson jerked his feet from beneath the covers and twisted around to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Er . . . ah . . . er . . . Jezebel, Miss Winslow . . . er . . . and vice versa," he introduced them awkwardly, the while blushing furiously. Then, to Jezebel: "Miss Winslow's an . . . er

... old friend of mine." And to Miss Winslow: "This is Jezebel, the ghost I was telling you about."

Jezebel's glittering eyes fastened on Miss Winslow. They had the same suspicious gleam that characterizes the orbs of a rattlesnake about to strike. She slithered across the room to Mr. Thompson's side. One slender hand caressed his pajama-clad shoulder.

"W'at are you doing under zee bed?" she demanded in a too-silky tone. "'Arold ees my lovar." She ran the long fingers of her other hand through Mr. Thompson's rumpled hair. He forced a milk-and-water smile.

"An' you, 'Arold!" the sultry lady reproached. "'Ow many times must I tell you I'm not ghost? I'm succubus, name of Jezebel, an' I'm all yours. Ah, my 'Arold!" Jezebel drew an ecstatic breath. "I love you so!" Her arms wrapped around him in a fond embrace. "Now w'y don' you send thees woman away zo we can be alone? Thees ees a night for love, my 'Arold—"

"Oh, no, you don't!" snapped Miss Winslow icily, completing the rearrangement of her own somewhat disheveled dress. "I want to know just what's going on here. What do you mean, you're not a ghost?"

Jezebel glared.

"I'm not ghost!" she reiterated. "I'm succubus."

"*Succubus?*" What's that?"

"Hmmp!" sniffed Jezebel, tossing her raven locks in contempt at such ignorance. "Don't you know anything?"

Miss Winslow's lips were a thin, irritated line. Her toe tapped a measured indignation. She said nothing.

"Succubus," Jezebel deigned finally to explain in the same tone one would use on a half-witted child of eight, "ees—how you say?—eentelligence w'at can make eetself body w'enevair eet

wants. *Le diable* ees our mastair. Een zee ol' days, 'e would geeve each sorcerair—wizard—one of us to"—one of her hands rippled over her own voluptuous torso from shoulder nearly to knee in skillful imitation of an erotic caress, while her full lips curved in an evil smile—"to . . . amuse 'eem." She shrugged expressively. "But now—now zere are zo few sorcerairs left. Zo we mus' find new men to make 'appy."

"OH!" choked the lovely Miss Winslow in furious embarrassment. "Oh! How can you stand there, and—and— Oh, of all the wanton Jezebels—"

The sultry beauty nodded.

"Zat ees right. Zey call us wantons, too. An' zumtimes zey call us—how you say?—familiars." She beamed unpleasantly at the newspaperwoman. "Now you go, no? My 'Arold an' I, we want to be alone togetheair!"

"Hey, don't say that!" young Mr. Harold Thompson broke in plaintively, his brow wrinkling to imitate a shagbark hickory's trunk. "I don't want to be alone with *you*. I just want to be alone. All alone!"

Jezebel's long fingers smoothed his brown hair.

"Ah, but 'Arold! You weel learn to love me. Zo many othair men 'ave! An' zo weel you!" There was a torridly seductive lilt to her voice. She stroked his cheek lightly.

There was a trapped rat gleam in the eyes of the succubus' involuntary sweetheart. He cast a longing glance toward the window, as if meditating on diving out.

"Look, Jezebel, be reasonable," begged Miss Winslow, interrupting again. "Can't you see you're ruining this poor fellow's life? Can't you see how hunted and worn he looks? Why,"—she grew eloquent in her

pleadings—"why, even his girl has walked out on him—"

The voluptuous one passed it off with an easy gesture of triumph.

"But of course! 'Ees girl know she's lost eem. No woman ees zo lovely, zo tempting, zo desirable, as we succubi. An' no succubus ees zo beautiful, zo passionate, as Jezebel!" Laughing softly, she bent to kiss her "'Arold" behind the ear. Young Mr. Thompson accepted the caress with eyes squeezed tight shut, and clenched teeth bared in a grimace of anathema.

Miss Winslow stomped her foot in a fury. Her golden curls swirled in a little tempest of rage.

"You— you—!" She tried to remember some of her fellow-newspaper workers' more lurid epithets. "Of all the disgraceful—"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The door to the hall shook with thunderous knocks.

"I'm comin' in!" a raging yet somehow feminine voice cried. "Ready or not, Mr. Thompson, I'm comin'!"

Miss Winslow and Mr. Thompson were frozen in their tracks. Not so Jezebel.

"I theenk I go now, 'Arold," she murmured in her most confidential tone. "But don' worry. I come back to-morrow night sure."

Even as she spoke she was vanishing. By the time the words were finished she was a vague blur of light fast growing dimmer.

THE door burst open. A massive female of obvious Irish descent stood in the entryway. She was garbed in a bathrobe that was strangely reminiscent of a worn-out army pup-tent; flapping slippers; and half a ream of curl papers.

"So!" she cried in a voice that lifted the roof three inches clear of the sides

of the house. "So! At last I've nabbed ye, my fine fellow! A woman in yer room, an' you always goin' around so polite an' pious! Hummph!" She snorted like a donkey engine getting up steam.

Miss Winslow opened her mouth to protest against the clear implication of the other's words, but her vocal cords had gone on strike. No sound came forth. Her eyes dropped before the blunt accusation in the landlady's savage glare. The silence thickened to the consistency of a pea-soup fog.

"Please!" croaked young Mr. Thompson. "You don't understand—"

"I understand all I need to, you young spalpeen. An' I don't want to hear yer excuses. Get out! Right now, d'ye hear me? Get out! I run a decent house!"

And, turning to Miss Winslow:

"Oh, a nice-lookin' girl like you! What can ye be thinkin'?"

Apparently the answer to this rhetorical question was too much for even the landlady's nerves. With a wild wail she burst into tears and fled the room.

Miss Winslow reflected, as she and Mr. Thompson walked down the stairs, that her blushing apparatus had gotten its most vigorous workout in years to-night.

THEY met the next evening in the same cocktail lounge as before.

"Ruth!" cried Mr. Thompson, springing up from his seat as she came in at the appointed hour. Then, realizing what he had said, and flushing a little: "I mean . . . Miss Winslow. I guess I forgot myself for a minute there."

The girl sat down across from him.

"I wish you'd keep right on forgetting, then," she confided. "I'd much rather my friends called me 'Ruth' in-

stead of 'Miss Winslow.' "

For a moment the shadow that lay across her companion's face like the cover of smoke above a forest fire lifted.

"Fine. And you'll call me—"

"I'll call you Harry," the vision of blonde loveliness across the table interrupted. "But don't ask me to make it 'Harold'." A little shudder ran through her. "Not with your friend Jezebel calling you that."

Young Mr. Thompson agreed. Then the cloud settled over him again. He stared at his drink with all the moodiness of a Russian genius.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

With elaborate and obviously artificial casualness:

"Oh, nothing."

"Harry! What is it?"

Her companion sighed. It was a duplicate of the sigh sighed by a Christian martyr en route in an oil-soaked toga to serve as a torch for Nero.

"Please, Harry—"

"All right. I'll tell you. My boss . . . well, he had me in his office today. He said I'd always done good work, but that I'd have to choose between having a good time and keeping my job."

"I'm afraid I don't understand—"

The haggard young man indicated the dark bags which framed each of his eyes. His forefinger traced the lines of worry which marred his otherwise handsome face.

"The boss noticed 'em," he explained sadly. "He thinks I'm spending my nights painting the town red. And I can't tell him the truth without lining myself up as a likely candidate for the loony bin."

The young newspaperwoman squeezed his hand encouragingly beneath the table.

"Don't worry any more, Harry. I

think I've got the answer!"

"The answer—! You mean, you know how to get rid of Jezebel—? Oh, Ruth—" His face lighted up like Times Square on Saturday night.

The girl leaned forward confidentially.

"We won't know 'til you try it, of course," she warned, "but it seems like a good idea."

THE mute adoration of a dog whose master holds a beefsteak stared back at her from Harry's eyes.

"This is such a different problem than I generally have to solve," she confessed. "Most of the letters that come to my column are from people who can be helped either by psychology, or common sense, or a combination of the two. But yours—well, I didn't know how to begin."

"But what do I do?"

Ruth Winslow smiled.

"Really, it's terribly simple, when you come right down to it," she told him. "I'm surprised we didn't think of it before."

"But what—?"

Her eyes sparkled with barely-repressed enthusiasm.

"You get a room-mate!"

"A room-mate?"

"Of course. Don't you remember how Jezebel kept trying to get you alone last night? Well, if she can't do it, she's beaten!"

Her companion looked doubtful.

"Maybe. But it seems a little too simple. That creature's got a lot of angles." A moment's pause. "Besides, I don't know who I'd get on short notice."

Jubilation sang in Ruth's retort:

"I've already taken care of that. I've got you a room-mate who'll be a match for this Jezebel any day. And he wants a room-mate right away, too."

Young Mr. Thompson eyed her questioningly.

"Mike Finnerty!" she explained. "You know, the big fellow from the circulation department who came with us last night. I saw him today to thank him for his trouble, and he mentioned that his room-mate had been drafted and that he wanted to get someone else."

Harry forced a grin.

"When do I move in?" he demanded.

"Tonight. Mike's in a bar down on State Street waiting for us."

Her haunted-looking friend rose to his feet.

"Let's go!" he challenged. "Might as well get it over with."

Ruth got up also.

"Oh, one thing," she warned. "I didn't tell Mike that you were having any trouble. So don't let on that anything's wrong."

"Sure not," agreed Harry with a rueful little chuckle. "After all, there's supposed to be a special angel to look after fools, drunks, and Irishmen."

THE Blade's problems columnist made it her self-appointed task early the next day to seek out burly Mike Finnerty.

"How's the new room-mate, Mike?" she called.

The big circulation man shambled over to her. There was a most peculiar grin on his broad Irish face.

"He's a swell guy, Miss Winslow," he reported. "Believe me, sister, dat sure was a right steer you gave me. From here on out, anyt'ing you want, just lemme know."

Ruth eyed him suspiciously.

"Somehow, you sound a trifle too enthusiastic to be true," she commented a bit caustically. "What happened last night, Mike?"

"Why, nothin', Miss Winslow.

Nothin' a-tall. Cross me heart!" If the look of injured innocence the big fellow turned on her had strayed from her face, it surely would have melted the *Blade* building's girders.

The girl gave up with a shrug. But all that day she pondered, eyeing the clock nervously as the moment when she was to meet Harry approached. At last it arrived. The tall young man strode across the city room toward her desk.

Ruth eyed him anxiously. He looked, if anything, worse than before. She hurried to get her coat and they left together.

"Well, Harry?" she probed when at last they were on the sidewalk outside. "Did it work? Are you rid of her?"

And Mr. Harold Thompson burst out with a roar of laughter that must have shaken Jove's throne on Olympus.

His companion's lips compressed a trifle.

"Harry, you look like the end of a misspent life. As if death would be a welcome relief to you. And then you laugh like that! What's the matter?"

Harry sighed weakly.

"I just can't help it, Ruth," he confessed. "It's terrible, but it's so funny I can't help laughing."

"You mean she . . . she came?"

Her escort nodded.

"She certainly did. Right on the dot."

"What—what happened?"

"She saw Mike. And Mike saw her just about the same instant. I figured the fireworks were all ready to start."

"Didn't they?" Ruth demanded breathlessly.

Harry shook his head.

"No such luck. Jezebel said: 'I want to see your friend, m'sieur.' And while she talked she gave him one of those slow, sulky looks that send the temperature of the room up 30 degrees.

"So then, while Mike lay there with his eyes bugging out half-way to my bed, she slithered across to me."

Ruth's face was taking on the rosy hue of a ripe tomato in spite of herself.

"You mean . . . that brazen creature came over and started making love to you with Mike right there in the room?"

"That's the size of it. I was fighting her off as well as I could, with Mike watching, when all of a sudden she seemed to forget all about me." Harry broke down, again to imitate a laughing hyena in one of its merrier moods.

"So all of a sudden she turned to Mike. She said: 'M'sieur, you look so lonely you break Jezebel's heart.'"

"So Mike admitted that he was lonely, and so what?"

"'M'sieur,' she says, 'I 'ave a friend 'oo ees very lonely, too. She would like you, m'sieur.'"

"Mike said: 'I'd like her, too, sister, if she's anyting like you.'"

"WELL, the next thing I knew, Jezebel was blowing on a little tin whistle, and another woman was materializing right in the middle of our room. Same type as Jezebel, only with red hair.

"Jezebel said: 'Thees ees Abrahel, m'sieur. Abrahel, thees gentleman ees so lonely.' And after that . . ." Harry's voice trailed off.

"Don't bother to go on from there," Ruth snapped. "I saw the smirk on Mike's face this morning."

For several moments, silence. Then:

"Harry."

"Yes, Ruth." He had quit laughing now, and once again resembled a racing fan whose last five-spot was on the nose of the horse fourth across the finish line.

"Harry, we're going over to see an old friend of mine right now. Doctor Essrick. He's the best psychiatrist in

town, and he knows more about solving problems than I ever dreamed of."

"A psychiatrist!" Harry reared back like a horse stung by a hornet—and with about the same wild light in his eyes. "Hey. I'm not crazy. Remember? You saw Jezebel, too."

"Of course. But Doctor Essrick knows all about these things. He'll be able to give us some good suggestions."

"Well . . . all right, then. But I still don't know whether it's a good idea."

Doctor Essrick, they discovered, was still in his resplendent velour-and-veneer office, a luxurious spot which he fondly termed "The House A Thousand Headaches Built." He greeted the young newspaperwoman warmly.

"Doctor," she explained when the amenities were over, "Harry, here, has quite a problem. I thought maybe you could help him."

The eminent psychiatrist nodded his billiard-bald head with a proper degree of professional sympathy. "Tell me all about it," he invited.

Harry leaned forward and spoke with the fervor and sincerity of a borrower begging the finance company not to repossess the furniture for another week. When he had finished, Doctor Essrick nodded sympathetically once more and rose from his chair.

"I'll discuss your problem with you in just a moment," he declared in a soothing voice. "And now, if you'll excuse me for a few seconds—" He hurried from the room.

Harry shot Ruth an anxious glance.

"Think he believed me?" he asked.

"Of course, Harry. I'm sure he did."

But secretly the young newspaperwoman felt strangely nervous. For one thing, she couldn't understand Doctor Essrick's leaving the room; ordinarily he wanted to complete an interview before going out of a patient's presence.

The bald little doctor came scampering back to his desk. He began asking questions.

"There was a knock at the door.

"Excuse me, please," apologized the psychiatrist. "My secretary has gone home for the day." He hurried across the room, opened the door.

Two burly men with white coats stood on the threshold. They eyed Harry with a somehow sinister interest.

"There he is, boys!" cried the doctor. "Watch out! He may be dangerous!" And, aside to Ruth: "I'm sorry, Miss Winslow, but these hallucination cases may be unsafe. Your friend will be much better off someplace where we can keep him under observation."

THE two men had sprung forward at the psychiatrist's first command. One of them had a heavy canvas coat hanging over his arm. A straitjacket!

"Harry! Look out!" Ruth screamed.

Her companion was already in action. He leaped behind Doctor Essrick's big desk. Circling, he kept it between himself and the two orderlies. But the pair separated. Soon they could not help but corner him. Already he was wild-eyed at the prospect.

Ruth intervened.

The psychiatrist was in front of her, egging on the attendants. Across the room crouched the harassed Harry. In two swift steps she was beside the doctor. A shapely, silken leg shot out, interposed itself in front of his. Gripping him by the collar, she gave a tremendous shove.

Little Doctor Essrick sailed across the room in a head-long plunge. He sprawled in front of one of his men.

"Harry!" screamed the distraught Miss Winslow.

The tall young man erupted into action. Before the one attendant could untangle his feet from Doctor Essrick's,

Mr. Thompson was past him and running for the door. The other attendant lunged. Harry sent him slamming back against the wall with a straight-arm Red Grange would have envied in his prime.

Ruth close behind him, he dived through the doorway. Seconds later they were plummeting down one flight of stairs after another, working on the theory that elevators were far too slow for their purposes.

They stopped, finally, in a quiet alley. Harry straightened his tie and adjusted the hang of his coat, while the girl tucked stray wisps of silky blonde hair back into their proper places.

"Well," muttered Harry, with the air of a chronic dyspeptic washing down a dill pickle with a glass of milk, "I guess that settles it. If she still wants me, Jezebel's got me. I'd rather put up with her than to spend the rest of my days chasing butterflies around an insane asylum."

Ruth stepped to a position directly in front of him.

"Mister," she declared, "I refuse to admit we're licked. There must be some way out."

"All we have to do is find it," her companion stated, in a tone which implied that he expected to land on the moon in a space ship before that happened.

A sudden spark of light gleamed in Ruth's blue eyes. She meditated for a moment or two. Then:

"I think I've got an idea!"

"What do we do with it?"

"We talk it over. Where can we go?"

"Down to my room. They're not so particular there as at the other place. And Mike's not home this evening."

Ruth took his arm and hurried him down the street.

"This is a real idea," she urged him on excitedly. "Jezebel hasn't got a chance now!"

In spite of himself, Harry grinned. "I'd like to listen to you arguing that point with her successfully," he taunted.

THEY reached the house just as a tall, dignified, and somewhat familiar-appearing gentleman came down the steps. Two women, also definitely on the stately side, accompanied him. Harry sprang forward to greet them.

"Dad! Mother! Aunt Jane!" he cried happily. "Say, it's grand to have you here. You should have told me you were coming, though. I'd have figured out some entertainment."

The faces of the trio could not have been more frigid had they been immersed in liquid air. They glared at young Mr. Thompson as if he had the devil's cloven hoof stamped on his forehead. But the tall young man was too jubilant to notice.

"Ruth," he exclaimed, "these are my people. Folks, I want you to meet Miss Ruth Winslow, a very dear friend of mine."

The look the three shot Ruth clearly implied that the pleasure, if any, was all hers.

"We gathered from the state of your room that you had a 'very dear friend' about," Harry's father said icily. "However, we didn't think you'd be brazen enough to flaunt her to our faces!"

Aunt Jane nodded indignant affirmation. Mrs. Thompson was weeping quietly.

"But Dad—"

"There is no need for any further discussion of the matter, Harold. Save that, needless to say, I am deeply grieved and disappointed."

Whereupon the trio sailed majestically on down the walk, leaving a crimson-faced Ruth standing beside a Harry whose jaw had dropped so far as to resemble Joe E. Brown yawning.

"Jezebel!" young Mr. Thompson ex-

ploded suddenly. "That's it! This is some of her work!"

Together, he and the girl hurried up the stairs. The door to the room he and Mike shared was ajar. He stared inside, and the wind went out of him as from a punctured balloon.

"Oh!" he gasped in awful realization.

"Oh!" choked Ruth, beside him, in similar shock.

The room was reminiscent of a disorderly burlesque queen's boudoir. Harry's bed was thrown open, and cosmetics smeared the pillow. The most intimate of feminine undergarments littered the room.

"Jezebel!" raged Harry.

A voice from the far corner said:

"Yes, my 'Arold. I come!"

A LIGHT glowed phosphorescently.

In another second the sultry succubus herself materialized. Slinky-hipped, she moved toward the haggard young man.

"Ah, 'Arold! At last you call me!"

"Listen, you!" fumed Harry. "Do you realize what you've done? My family came up here tonight and found the room looking like this—"

Jezebel's evil leer was a seductive triumph.

"But 'Arold!" she soothed and mocked at once. "Don't they know you're beeg boy now?"

Stark murder boiled from young Mr. Thompson's eyes. He started forward, hands tensed, fingers claw-like, with clearly homicidal intent.

"Harry!" shrieked Ruth in horror. "Don't!" she clutched at his arm and braked his progress. "Stop it! You can't do it! There's a better way. Come on with me!"

For a moment it appeared she could not lure him from his mission. Then reason began to seep back into his brain. He allowed himself to be led away.

Jezebel watched them go, her eyes glowing with wicked content.

"At las' I make zum progress," she congratulated herself aloud for them to hear. "Love an' hate are very close togethair. Now 'e 'ates me. Soon 'e weel love me instead."

RUTH had gotten the address from a *Blade* feature writer who once had done a story about its occupant. It was a tumble-down building in an unsavory tenement district.

"He's on the third floor," she explained to Harry as she led the way up the creaking stairway. "I'm sure he'll be able to help you."

Her companion cleared his throat uneasily.

"I hope you're right. But I certainly never dreamed I'd ever be consulting a—"

"Here we are!" the girl interrupted. Her hard little knuckles beat a rapid tattoo on a time-blackened door. A grin trembled momentarily on the lips of the tall young man beside her as he caught her profile in the dim light. She was, he reflected, very much on the order of a youthful, beautiful, and determined blonde goddess.

The ancient door opened with a creaking of hinges that sent chills up and down their spines. A cadaverous man of obviously oriental extraction stood before them. He was garbed in a robe of coffin-black hue. A turban of equally grim color was wound about his head. He stared out at them in silence, saying nothing.

The lovely Miss Winslow recovered her voice first.

"You're Ali Karan?" she demanded of the sinister apparition before them. The gaunt figure bowed.

"I am." There was an indefinable accent to the croaking voice.

"They—they say you're a sorcerer.

A witch-doctor." There was an almost-panicky little note in Ruth's voice which suggested that she hoped like everything "they" were wrong.

The walking corpse bowed again.

"In my humble way—I am!"

"If you'll let us in, we'd like to tell you about some . . . trouble . . . we're having. We thought maybe you could help us."

The black figure moved aside and motioned them into the room. It was a most remarkable room. Black draperies covered the walls. A row of mummy cases lined one side, a bookcase filled with ancient tomes the other. The floor was a mass of cabalistic figures. In the center of the room was a queer, three-legged stand. A human skull rested in its center.

Harry surveyed it dourly.

"Some people visit the chamber of horrors," he observed. "We come here."

"Sssh!" hissed Ruth. "Here he comes!"

Ali Karan slithered into the room like a hungry black buzzard. He pulled a bench from a niche behind the draperies and motioned his visitors to sit down.

"For what have you come?"

HARRY told his story with all the pathos of an Eddie Guest poem.

The sorcerer nodded.

"So you wish that I, Ali Karan, should exorcise this succubus—this demon—that possess you?"

His visitors nodded like worried twin jumping jacks.

"Just get rid of that female," Harry begged. "I don't care how you do it. Just get rid of her!"

Ali Karan stared him straight in the eyes.

"For such a difficult and dangerous task you must pay me five hundred dollars."

Young Mr. Thompson shook his head sadly.

"I haven't got it. The most I can raise is three hundred."

"I'll put up the other two hundred!" the *Blade's* problems columnist rejoined promptly. "There's nothing I wouldn't do to defeat that awful woman."

Like magic, a checkbook appeared at their host's fingertips.

"If I fail, you may stop payment," he explained. And then, beaming on them with the sweet benignity of a hungry tiger as it sights its prey: "If I succeed, it would be most inadvisable for you to do so."

There followed a long and confusing thaumaturgical ritual, involving incantations, incense, and something that smelled like iodoform. Misty cobwebs of ghostly light floated in the air; spidery shapes wove them into fantastic patterns. The girl's hand sought her escort's in the darkness. Then, slowly, there came a familiar glow in the center of the room. Jezebel's head, with its shimmering mass of snaky black hair, began to materialize, followed by her sinuously sensual body.

"'Arold!" she cried in syrupy tone, "you 'ave called me to you!"

"'Arold" shivered as if he could feel death's icy breath on the back of his neck. But before he could reply Ali Karan intervened.

"Jezebel!" the cadaverous wizard thundered. "Why do you haunt this man?"

The succubus stripped him with a glance, then turned back to her quarry.

"Can't you see zat?" she sighed. "Ah, 'e is 'andsome! 'Ow I love 'eem!"

In no wise disconcerted, the man in black tried again.

"This man does not want you," he declared. "You do not find favor in his eyes. You must leave him!"

Jezebel shook her head with sinister cheer.

"'E ees young," she explained. "'E weel learn. Me, I am a sousan' years old. I 'ave seen other men 'oo didn't respond to my *grand passion* at first. But zey learned!" She shrugged her bare shoulders. "*Voila!*"

THE wizard's eyes were like glowing coals. His voice dropped to an insinuating note.

"Jezebel, must I remind you of something?"

"Remin' me of w'at?" She turned on him, eyes flashing dangerously.

Ali Karan took a deep breath.

"Must I remind you you are a succubus?" he demanded grimly. "That you are allowed to consort only with those who have sold their souls to your master, the devil himself?"

"Oh, zat?" smirked Jezebel. "My frien', you are—how you say?—behind zee times. *Le diable* an' I, we 'ave talked zis matter over. I tell 'eem zat if 'e wait 'til 'e got men for us, us succubi won' nevair 'ave fun again. *But*, if 'e let us go out after men, we bring 'eem more souls zan 'e's had since zee Dark Ages! So *le diable*, 'e says yes!"

"It will not hold up!" snapped Ali Karan. "It is in violation of ten thousand years of tradition. The only men you can have are those who already have sold their souls and had the devil's mark placed upon them."

Jezebel spun about to face him. Her evilly beautiful face was dark. She stood, arms akimbo, before the sorcerer.

"'Ave a care, my frien'!" she warned silkily. "Zere are limits—"

"The young man has not sold his soul," the cadaverous wizard reiterated stubbornly. "You have no right to claim him."

Almost lazily, the succubus' hand reached out. Yet, somehow, it touched

Ali Karan's turban before he could jump away. Or, perhaps, he was too paralyzed with sudden fear to move. Jezebel's long fingers dug under the edge of the turban, jerked it off. She touched a strange symbol, branded in the living flesh of the sorcerer's forehead, that the headgear had concealed.

"But I 'ave a right to claim *you*, don' I?" she said softly. "You 'ave sold *your* soul. *Le diable's* mark is on *your* forehead."

"No!" screamed the gaunt wizard. "No! You can't! Let me go—"

Jezebel was nodding unpleasantly.

"Yes. Eet ees time you became even bettair acquainted weeth our mastair!"

"No!"

The shapely succubus' hands came together with a sharp *crack*. Smoke suddenly billowed forth from nowhere. There was a choking odor of brimstone in the black-draped room.

As quickly as it had come, the smoke disappeared. And with it had gone Ali Karan. Ruth and Harry still sat frozen on the bench, their eyes wide with terror and their hair standing as tautly on end as any porcupine's quills.

Jezebel turned to her reluctant lover and favored him with a broad and meaningful wink.

"I 'ave save you all zat money!" she cried happily. "Ah, my 'Aroid! Theenk of all zee presents you can buy me weeth eet!" She moved toward him.

With a wild cry of panic the two young people bolted through the doorway and down the stairs. Behind them, Jezebel laughed on.

IT was not quite noon the next day when Ruth looked up from the last-minute check she was making on her column for the day—already in galley proof—and saw Mr. Harry Thompson moving across the city room toward

her. She frowned up at him.

"Harry! What are you doing here at this time of day? Why aren't you on your job?"

Young Mr. Thompson—looking, if that were possible, even more disreputable than the night before—slumped into a chair beside her desk.

"I haven't got a job," he grunted.

"What!"

No horse ever had a longer face than her companion's at that moment.

"The boss just fired me," he mumbled. "He told me he'd given me a chance to quit burning the candle at both ends, but that I looked worse now than when he warned me."

The lovely Miss Winslow reached over to pat his hand consolingly.

"Don't worry, Harry. It could be worse."

"You think so? Look at this!"

Ruth accepted the envelope he extended with a puzzled air. It was from a law firm, she noted. Further, it had come by registered mail. She unfolded the letter. A moment's scanning and her face went white.

"Oh, Harry! Disinherited!"

He nodded glumly.

"Correct, little lady. I come from a pretty strict tribe, and I can just imagine the reaction they gave to finding Jezebel's clothes scattered all over my bed."

"Harry, I'm so sorry . . ."

"So am I." His voice was a melancholy echo of tragedy. His shoulders were slumped and his eyes scrutinized the floor. He went on:

"Just to make it perfect all around, I ran into my girl today. She wouldn't speak to me at first. I kept pestering her, though, and finally she broke down long enough to tell me my old landlady had seen her and told all about finding a woman in my room." He hesitated. "After that, I didn't bother even to try

to argue with her."

"Oh, Harry . . ." Ruth shook her golden head in complete confoundment.

Young Mr. Thompson forced the kind of a grin which would have looked better on a death's head.

"Oh, losing her doesn't worry me so much, Ruth. If she'd walk out on me in a pinch, I'm glad I got rid of her."

"Of course. And you can get another job. Maybe you can even explain to your family . . ."

Her companion shook his head somberly.

"What's the use? Jezebel has won, that's all. There's no reason to try to fight her off any more."

"Harry! You mustn't say that! There's sure to be some way out."

"Don't kid me, Ruth. I know when I'm licked, and this is it. Jezebel said she'd been winning for a thousand years. She's got all the angles covered."

THEY sat in a dark brown silence, gloom eddying about them like fog through San Francisco.

"Well," he said at last, "I guess I better be going." He raised his eyes to look at her.

Dawn was breaking on Miss Ruth Winslow's face. The dawn that heralded another weighty problem solved by the *Blade's* famed columnist-advisor.

"I've got it!" she cried.

An unsympathetic voice from the other side of the city room said:

"What? Measles?"

The young newspaperwoman paid her interrupter no heed. Instead, she seized Mr. Thompson by the arm and, hauling him behind her like a freighter in the wake of a tiny tug, made for the door.

"Hey, wait a minute—" he wailed in protest.

His pilot did not even pause.

"Mister," she threw back over her shoulder, "no problem has ever stumped me, and that includes this one. But we've got to work fast, so come on!"

HARRY was propped up in bed reading when the familiar phosphorescent glow appeared in the far corner of the room. Paying it no heed, he went on with his magazine.

A moment later Jezebel pirouetted across the room. She was wearing a new outfit of some diaphanous material which left practically nothing to the imagination. Harry, watching her out of the corner of his eye, swallowed hard. That filmy gown revealed a great deal, and practically all of it, he was forced to admit, was well worth looking at.

"Ah, my 'Arold!" chortled the succubus. "You wait for me! At las' you return my great love!"

The tall young man in the bed tossed aside his book.

"Lady," he grinned, "you are mistaken. I do *not* return your great love or anything else. In fact, this is the pay-off. You're washed up."

Jezebel took her stand close beside the bed in a pose that displayed her most ravishing charms in tempting array.

"But you wait for Jezebel," she cried triumphantly. "No more do you try to run away!"

"Of course not. I don't need to run away any more. You're licked, sister, now and forever, so why don't you admit it and be on your way?"

The shapely succubus swayed closer. Her hand reached out to caress her ever-reluctant lover's cheek.

A voice from the bathroom doorway said:

"My! What a touching scene!"
Jezebel spun about.

There, standing in the doorway, a vision of golden loveliness, was the trim, lithe figure of Ruth Winslow. She was clad in a negligee revealing at least as much as the other's garb—or lack of it.

"You!"

Ruth's gleaming blonde tresses rippled like ripe wheat as she nodded. She moved gracefully forward, toward the devil's feminine emissary.

Jezebel eyed her with suspicion.

"W'at you want?"

"Me? Oh, I just thought I'd like a closer look at that gown of yours." She studied it casually. "Really, Jezebel, dear, you should get a girdle. You're beginning to sag a bit, you know."

"W'y, you—I"

Ruth prattled artlessly on:

"Though I suppose it is rather hard for *you* to get a proper fit. Especially with the rubber shortage."

"I— I—! Oh, I should keel you!"

THE lovely Miss Winslow moved about to examine her adversary even more closely.

"And a new bra wouldn't be amiss, darling." She hesitated, almost as if a trifle embarrassed, then rushed on. "Really, I suppose I shouldn't speak of such . . . ah . . . intimate details to you, but after all, we women must stick together. And it's easy to understand how hard it must be for you to keep in trim, after a thousand long years. But men do notice, you know."

Jezebel whirled on Harry. He thought, for a moment, that there was smoke, as well as fire, coming out of her eyes; then decided he was imagining things.

"W'at's thees woman doing 'ere?"

"Of course, figures are a problem," Ruth went on cheerily. "I'm only 24, so of course mine's still pretty good"—she locked her hands behind her head

to display her own perfect form to the best advantage—"but heaven only knows what it'll look like if I ever live to be a thousand." She gave vent to a merry little laugh. "Worse than yours, maybe, Jezebel, dear!"

"W'y's thees woman 'ere?"

Young Mr. Thompson did not answer. He was having too hard a time keeping from bursting out in a cataclysm of laughter.

"And your hairdo. Really, it *is* on the old-fashioned side. There's a man here in town who could fix it up, though. He's a wonder! Shall I give you one of his cards?"

"Answer me, you fool! W'y's she 'ere?"

Harry forced himself to reply.

"Well . . . er . . . isn't it rather obvious, Jezebel? And especially to one of your discerning nature!"

The shapely succubus' face was drawn and pale.

"I don't understand. She's not zat kind of a girl . . ." She stumbled bewilderedly.

"Why, what don't you understand, Jezebel? I'll explain it to you." Ruth was solicitous.

"You—you are 'ere, weeth 'Arold an'"—the succubus shot a confused glance at her rival's dishabille attire—"an' no clothes!"

The lovely Miss Winslow's voice burst out in a gay peal of laughter.

"Jezebel! You, of all people! Why, Jezebel, bless your old soul, you're shocked!" And then, tapering the laugh to an occasional giggle. "But it's all right, Jezebel. We went across the state line this afternoon and got married."

"Married!"

"Jezebel wouldn't understand about that," the tall young husband rejoined. "After all, marriages are made in heaven!"

"You—an'—'eem—are—married?"
Jezebel's breath was coming in gasps.

"Yes, of course, darling. Aren't you going to give us your best wishes?"

But the succubus already was beginning to glow with the greenish light which always heralded her departures.

"Mike Finnerty's got a room down the hall," Ruth called. "He might like to see you."

Jezebel gave no sign of hearing. With a puff of smoke she was gone.

Ruth fell back across the bed, choking with laughter.

"Oh!" she gasped weakly. "Was that poor succubus ever burned up!"

Her husband drew her to him. His alligator grin stretched nearly from ear to ear.

"Spontaneous combustion!" he said.

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

(Concluded from page 6)

A NEW name on our contents page is Clark South, who does a yarn called "The Devil's Lady" which ought to give you a couple of jolts in various places! We've all heard of Jezebel, that succubus (she ain't much of a lady!) who is several thousand years old, and still chasing men around. Well, in this story she "haunts" a respectable young man, and gets him into all sorts of trouble. Personally, your editor kinda likes Jezebel, and if the young man in the story doesn't want to be haunted, we'll offer to take her off his hands. She would be a good pal even if she was a little bit on the "social security" side!

PERHAPS the reason for the above is just a little matter of sour grapes on our part. It seems the other night your editor had a date with a rather lovely young lady, who was strictly not "fantastic." Just an ordinary nice girl we thought we'd escort to the town's best play. Well, we thought wrong, and found ourselves stood up. Yep, believe it or not; editors are small fry to the modern girl!

To get to the point that applies to this magazine, we were so burned up we picked out a sailor who looked lonesome and escorted him in style to the play. And after awhile, it came out—he was one of our faithful readers! He knew all about us. And in an instant we were old pals with a million things to talk about.

So, the fantastic coincidence pops up again. The young man's name was Arnold Devolt, from Missouri, and your editor had a swell time showing a pretty lonesome guy a swell time. And if his pals at Navy Pier want to pull that "I was out with Mayor Kelly" stuff on him, let 'em read this. Okay, Arnold? Let 'em rib you now, eh? You saw a good show anyway!

THE other day we had a visitor. He was a handsome young lad by the name of Richard Earnhart, who happens to be National Champion

Speller, and more recently, part of the Quiz Kids program. We were very flattered to learn that the one thing in Chicago he wanted very much to do was to visit the offices of his favorite magazine. It was our companion magazine, *Amazing Stories*. And you can bet he walked out with a copy of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* under his arm. And for you readers who keep picking out typographical errors in our books, Richard says: "Considering the number of magazines published by Ziff-Davis, there are remarkably few errors in spelling." And a National Champion ought to know!

DID you know that Nature was a very excellent barber? Well, she won't give you the shave herself, but she will furnish you with all the material free of charge.

For the razor, all you have to do is to find a certain species of climbing grass and remove some of its seeds. Each seed contains two tiny blades which are as sharp as our finest steel blades. The blades dull very easily and so you'd better take quite a few. And now for our lather (you know how a dry shave pulls and leaves your face irritated). Nature gives up a choice of several soaps. If you moisten the yellow tendrils and green leaves of the soap vine you get a nice lather. Or, if you prefer, you can go to the soapberry bush or the soap-bark tree for your lather. Then all you have to do is lather up, hold the blades very carefully, and shave yourself.

Just another way that nature gives of keeping down the cost of living and preventing inflation. Of course, you have to go to Central or South America for the free shave, but perhaps someday you'll feel like traveling.

BOTANISTS and biochemists of the University of California have experimented with the juice of the milkweed plant for tenderizing meat and have found that it contains a substance that can be used as a successful substitute for papain, an extract of the tropical papaya plant, now used for that purpose.

About a half-million pounds of papaya are imported each year, but the scientists believe that large-scale and improved cultivation of milkweed will produce enough of the new substance to make

us self-sufficient. This is the first commercial use that has ever been discovered for the formerly useless milkweed plant.

HERE'S a flash announcement that will interest you. By all means get a copy of the September issue of *Flying*, our sister magazine, and get the real lowdown on the R.A.F. This is the most sensational issue of *Flying* ever put out, and contains the complete story, sensationally illustrated, of our British flying cousins.

THERE are many partnerships formed between plants and insects, but one of the strangest of all is that which has been formed between a species of orchids native to Panama and the red ant.

Most species of orchids can be pollinated by humans and produce blossoms, but this species of orchids is so attached to the red ant that they will not blossom under any condition unless pollinated by these red ants. This partnership involves more than just pollination, however. The orchid gives the red ant its home among its roots and bulbs and food in the form of its honey. In return, the red ant protects the orchid from bugs, animals, or man who dare to molest it. Since these red ants are vicious biters, the birds and animals usually leave the orchid alone and the men who pick the orchids for shipment to distant cities must be very careful when they remove the red ants for the ants will fight to the last to protect their strange partner.

ALTHOUGH all Americans know that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, many do not know that he was probably the first man to realize the benefits of mass production and its ever present partner, the assembly line.

Eli's main business was the production of firearms in his factory near Lake Whitney in New Haven. The procedure for making a musket was for one person to follow the general pattern, but to make, fit and adjust all of his own parts for the musket. Thus, no two muskets were exactly alike. This plan had worked satisfactorily for hundreds of years in this country and the old world and no one had thought of changing it. That is no one until the day that Eli received an unusually large order of muskets that were needed by the government in the War of 1812. He saw the possibilities of producing the muskets on a mass production basis by using an assembly line. He knew this would require that all the individual parts of the musket be produced so uniformly that each could fit into any musket that was to be produced.

He assigned each of his men to the task of producing only one part for the musket instead of the entire gun as was done under the old method. These parts were then passed to another group of workers who could take the various parts and assemble them into a complete musket. Under the new system, every musket was exactly

the same. Eli's workers soon became specialists in the production of parts and the assembling of guns instead of being a jack-of-all trades.

Thus, Eli Whitney saw and fathered a new era of American production that has been developed to such a stage that today our huge war plants can produce tanks, guns, planes, and jeeps on huge assembly lines that will never stop rolling until victory is ours.

NATURE was very good to the Indians of Mexico and Central America when she gave them the century plant which the natives call the thread and needle plant. This plant furnishes the Indians with practically everything they need to exist. As long as this plant grows, the Indians will never starve, be cold, or thirsty.

The roots of the century plant are edible as they are or can be dried and ground into a very nutritious flour for bread. The juice when fresh is called pulque and is very delicious, or it can be fermented into mescal, a very intoxicating drink.

The leaves are used by the Indians for thatch on the roof of their homes, to make mats for sleeping, to make seats and backs for their chairs, and for other household uses. The fibers in the plant are as strong as our own manufactured rope and is used as such, or it can be formed into a thread that makes a very durable cloth.

The Indians can produce a needle and thread by simply cutting off a leaf of the plant near the base. One leaf end being very sharp, is a natural needle while the other pulp end near the base is pounded between two stones until it becomes a number of long threads that are unbelievably strong. With this needle, thread, and cloth, the Indian women make garments for the entire family.

MAYBE a few hints as to what's coming in the next issue would serve to tempt your reading palate until we get around again in thirty days. And besides, we've got twenty lines to write yet to fill this column. Yes, we write by "lines" and we flatter ourselves that we can almost always give the typesetter absolutely correct measure to fill a page.

Anyway, our November issue will carry Nelson S. Bond's complete novel "When Freeman Shall Stand." It's his finest novel, and we are presenting it this time in one big lump, for the benefit of those soldier readers of ours who can't keep up with serials. We know you'll like it!

Then there's another Lefty Feep story, "The Golden Opportunity of Lefty Feep." There's enough humor there to laugh you right out of your shirt. John York Cabot does an unusual one called "Talu's Fan," written around a Magarian illustration. A newcomer, Clee Garson, will startle you with "Sharbeau's Startling Statue" (don't miss this one!). And plenty more. So, until you get that super issue, keep on slapping the Jap with war hounds. Then it won't be long before they take the *Rap*.

THE EMPRESS

A Fantastic Classic

by **ROSS ROCKLYNNE**

This great story, originally published in the May, 1939 issue of *Fantastic Adventures*, is presented once more because of popular demand.

CHAPTER I

In a Strange Land

FLAT on my stomach I lay, heart beating wildly, the mudflats of the Thasser Canal a veritable stench in my nostrils. Above me, on the sagging plankings of the rotting Jador wharf, I heard the ribald oath of the Captain of the Guards, as he feared that I had escaped his clutches and his thirsting dirk.

Scarce three feet distant lapped the foul waters of the Thasser, dark, evil, mysterious in the misty darkness of the Martian night. And out there, on the dark waters, rode at anchor a single houseboat, blunt-browed, three-cabined. Farther down the dock, whence went shipping to all the far-flung corners, of the dangerous, mad, warlike world, were other more stately craft, chief amongst them the palace boat of the self-styled Empress of Mars.

Oaths rose on the night air, and I knew that not this easily would Miran Borg, Captain of the Royal City Guards, give up the search. Nay! My dead bleeding body he'd have, as warning to other uncertified foreigners. I cursed the moment I had, in my foolhardiness, exposed myself in the full glare of light for my typically angular Wergite features were no asset in the

cruel, barbarous land of Crill.

Off to my right I heard a dull thud, as a harran bokka flung himself from the rotting wharf, landed with catlike feet on the Thasser mudflats. I saw his eyes flash in the gloom as they turned on my hiding place. Slowly, warily, he crept toward me. And I, weaponless, in very fear of death, waited.

Mad, warlike world! As I lay there, with death encircling me, creeping in on me with sure tread, my thoughts spun with nostalgia to that blue world which men called Earth. My mind spun back to the ancient civilizations three thousand years gone, when all the planets that rushed eternally about the Sun had been settled, colonized, united in a common bond of friendship. And then, fearsome thing, like some rash disease, interplanetary war had broken out, ravaged up and down the length and depth of the solar system, decimated nine-tenths of the human race.

And as it faded away, there were left a dozen isolated planets, peopled with men of Earth, bereft greatly of all save a barbarous science, bereft of the manner of flight across the void. Worlds plunged back across thousands of years to a state of barbaric culture, in which sword and dirk and the power of might rose and displaced cold mathematical science.

And I was one of those barbarians; I

OF MARS . . .



"Don't scream," warned Darak. "I'm desperate!"

who had first seen the stark, brilliant light of day in my little country far across the Martian wastes.

My little country, my princess! Emotion and a blaze of sheer anger choked my throat. That I should be lying in the wet and cold of the Thasser mudflats, doomed to sudden merciless death, with my princess, beloved of my people, still in dire peril at the hand of the cruel Empress! Wrong, it was. *Wrong!*

THE harran* crept along toward me, crouched. Not yet had his eyes picked me out of the gloom, but I saw his short sword, clutched to the ready in his hand. I drew my naked, freezing hands up under me, braced them on the stinking surface of the mudflats. The harran paused under the shadow of the wharf. And then, his eyes dilating, his breath coming hoarsely, he saw me, and made as if to give warning.

Too late! With the speed of a darak†—indeed, my public name is Darak—I leaped from the noisome ground, flung myself full at him. Had he a moment's warning, some slight knowledge of my far-famed speed, I were dead, with the short of his sword piercing me through

to the heart.

But ere he could utter a syllable, I grasped him about the throat. With a single motion I flung him across my bent knee, and the sound of his shattered vertebrae was a sharp crack in the night.

Then crouching, hoping against hope that sounds of the conflict might not have reached the ears of my pursuers, I waited. Vain hope. Came a voice, harsh, rasping, from above me.

"What say you, Rinui? You've found him?"

Well knowing the need of action, my lips ground out the harsh gutturals of the Crillian tongue.

"A trice to these littered shores, Miran Borg! By Jaos, I've ruined my leg!"

"To the devil with your leg, then!" snarled Miran Borg. "You've seen a sign of the Wergite?"

"Gone," I growled surlily. "Best we continue the search down to Cratlas Pier. And may I be the one to sever his guts from his body!"

"Five shabra to the man who does! But 'ware of him, for he is large of body and swift of mind!" snarled Miran Borg, and then came his voice, shouting orders. Feet pounding, down the wharf, away to the landing. I stilled the pound of my heart, and drew a heartfelt breath of relief.

Then, softly, exultantly, I crept down to the shores of the Trasser, and plunged silently into its polar-cooled waters.

I glided out from the shadow of the wharf, propelling myself with short, powerful strokes, my nose barely above water.

The shore fell behind, as I headed midstream, bound for that single, blunt-prowed house-boat.

To its starboard quarter I went, my flesh chilled not so much from the freez-

* The Harrans are the police of Crill, members of the so-called nobility, who exercise their position and rank as a sort of National Guard, and peace-time member of the regular army. They are all officers, trained to command the bokkas, or privates, during wartime. Theirs is a life of fighting and murder on the slightest pretext, their greatest delight being the clash of swords and the spilling of blood. But they have a code of honor which can be depended upon, in spite of the fact that their motto is "Death." On Earth, in the 20th century, they would have been classed as soldiers of fortune, although unlike those ancient adventurers, they are an integral part of the government of the nation which they serve. They receive no pay, their rank entitling them to take what they want, by right of sword.—*Thompson's Sociology of the Martian Nations.*

† The Darak is a fleet, courageous animal, famed for its dexterity and fighting ability. Native of the mountainous regions.—*Fauna of Mars, Settlement Survey.*

ing waters as from the feel of obscence water creatures brushing against me, or coiling about my naked legs. Now the Jador wharf was hid from me by the uprising hulk of the apparently tenantless craft, and I threw one arm over the gunwale, and swiftly drew myself over the side.

Dripping water, I came to a wary crouch, my hand ready to my short-sword, which I had acquired from my assailant of a few moments gone, well aware that death lurked at every turn of a corner.

There was no sound on all the world now, save the far away scream of a yammir,* from far on the other side of this monstrous Martian city.

I heard a sound. I wheeled, in a flash had my short-sword out and ready to action. And it were well that perceptions on that night were keened to the utmost, for bearing down on me, up-raised sword glinting, bestial face cruel with the murder lust, came a very devil of a man!

"**H**AVE at you!" the giant roared, and his sword cut the air with a shriek, so narrowly missing me that I heard the singing of the metal as it flashed past my ear.

I leaped back, struck at his short sword savagely, and I imagine my own face was not a pretty thing to see, as we went at it hook and tongs. No amateur sword play here! Swifter than lightning he gave feint for feint, thrust for thrust, counterpoint for counterpoint.

"Die!" he cried, and his sword surely

* The Yammir is one of the few birds of Mars. It is long-legged, extremely fragile in appearance but agile in flight. It appears only at night, and its scream is entirely out of proportion with its appearance, being a shrill noise of deafening proportions. On Earth, its voice would be truly thunderous but on Mars, the thin atmosphere serves to heighten the pitch, and thin the volume.—*Fauna of Mars, Settlement Survey.*

and vengefully pushed forward through a space I had occupied but a fraction of a second before. I laughed savagely, but wasted not my breath on idle words, for I was pitted against a swordsman of cunning and brawn.

Slowly but surely, using a time-honored trick, I allowed him to press me back against the cabin-wall. For a well-versed antagonist the rule is to build up his confidence—then, a flash of steel, a swift counterpoint, a thrust to the heart—and victory!

Thus I knew it would be, and thus it was. A final parry, a diabolical feigned weakness, and he rushed at me. Too late he saw my ruse! He gave vent to a single whimpering cry as he fairly hurled himself onto the point of my sharp blade. He sagged, and his life spurted from his mouth, staining his dirty beard crimson.

I braced my foot against his massive body, and drew out my weapon. Stooping, I wiped the bloody sword on his tunic, then again came to my feet.

Warily I lay my hand to a companionway door, the virus of excitement running like strong red wine in my body.

I stiffened. What was that? The sound of a weeping woman? A woman, imprisoned against her will?

Abruptly, I flung open the door, and stood on the threshold of a dimly lit room. Out came my sword, for since the day when first I had departed my beloved homeland with the commission to return my abducted princess to the land of her fathers, death had walked side by side with me, and it were a poor day that saw no battle to the death.

But Death in that room did not await me. For Death is not a woman, particularly a woman beautiful beyond belief, ravishing, even with the tears staining the perfect bloom of her oval, lovely cheeks. She was cowering in a corner

of the room, a single short garment fastened about her shapeliness, her high breast rising and falling in her fear, her heavy black hair falling in lovely torrents over her shoulders.

CHAPTER II

Into Ancient Jador

NOW what I say here you will perhaps deride, for in one moment, you will inquire, how can the oldest, holiest of emotions come into the heart of a man, with a sureness that will brook no denial? Know you then, that one moment can, in the mind, become as a thousand years. I have heard men tell of how they had first looked deep into their loves' unscarred souls, and had seen in one moment—or a thousand years—all the virtues of woman since time immemorial, parading there, and, with scarce a conscious thought, knew that this was the woman for whom they would willingly fight a whole world!

Shall I continue to explain? Or shall I not attempt to explain a doubtless unexplainable mystery, whose roots lie at the very foundations of life itself? Good enough! Suffice to say, then, that as I gazed at her speechless, the rest of the world, and all the threatening dangers in it, receded from my thoughts. A burning emotion gripped me, my blood a pounding torrent in my body. I, Darak of Werg, knew that in this girl lay my destiny.

I took a dazed step toward her, and she cowered back from me, her soft breasts rising and falling convulsively. She saw in my eyes what I felt, and interpreted it wrongly.

"Go away and leave me!" she whispered, her violet eyes flaming.

"You wrong me," I said huskily. "I am not your enemy."

She shrank back as I advanced an-

other step. "How did you gain access to this boat?" she whispered. "How did you vanquish Deodum?"

"I killed him," I replied simply.

"I do not believe you could have killed him! He is too powerful."

I raised my sword to the light of the flickering tallow lamp. "The blood of Deodum has stained my weapon," I smiled, as I saw the hope in her eyes. Then I repeated, "I am your friend. I am a refugee, and but a few moments ago escaped death at the hands of the Royal City Guards."

A smile began to curve her lips, and she came toward me and lay her small, white hand on my bare arm. Once again under the spell of her violet eyes, the impulse which rose up in me would not be brooked. I swept her into my arms, her soft lips quivering, her body warm and vibrant against mine. And I could have sworn in that moment that she responded, before her own sweet innocence claimed possession of her.

She twisted savagely free of me, her eyes blazing. Then she struck me, harshly, with animal passion.

"You dare!" she hissed.

MY VOICE was a faraway thing in my ears, as I stepped back, stood straight, unmoving, white of face. I was not sorry for what I had done, yet I said, "Forgive me, wachin.* I lost myself to your beauty."

There was some hot retort on her lips, but she never uttered the words. Instead, her violet eyes swept with intense study over my angular features.

* Wachin—a term of endearment derived from the wachin, now extinct, a very beautiful and tiny animal whose body seemed almost ethereal, so transparent was its flesh, and so delicate the tracery of its violet veins, and its rosy luminous hair. They became susceptible to the germ of the common cold, brought from Earth, and an unchecked epidemic wiped them out.—*Fauna of Mars, Settlement Survey.*

"You are Wergite?" she questioned with unwonted eagerness, her lips parted. "You are a spy?"

"My business is none of yours," I responded coldly. "It was ill-luck alone which bade me seek this boat as refuge." Then I relented, and shoved my sword back into its scabbard.

"On the other hand, my mission is well-known in Jador, and the addition of another knowing ear will work no harm. Know then that scarce three score days ago the Princess of Werg, worshipped the length and breadth of my land, was set upon by a marauding band of Crillians, and brought to this country. My country is too small, too illy-armed to proceed against the mightiness of Crill—so, of all volunteers, I was chosen to restore her to her country."

Her look was suddenly very gentle. "You have much hope of succeeding?"

"I return with my princess," I replied, "or else I die. My princess first, and perhaps her bracelet."

"Her bracelet?"

"The talisman of her dynasty. The Royal Hinusian Bracelet, set with the fiery stones of life."

"I have heard much of this fabulous talisman," she said thoughtfully. "I have heard that the rays which radiate from it are as new life to the sick, the invalid, and the dying. I have heard rumor that in Werg all men are deathless." Her eyes were shining. "I have heard that though Werg is the smallest of all the countries on all Mars, still it is the greatest, the noblest. Its peoples are the deathless race! 'For the rays of the Hinusian Bracelet are powerless in all other countries. For from the very ground of Werg, and only Werg, do the rays that render the bracelet effective come. And you will know where this bracelet is secreted?' she asked gently.

I thrust up the short sleeve of my

wet, skin jacket, and showed her the transparent small box strapped above my biceps. She leaned forward, her eyes widening. I turned my shoulder slightly, and she watched the lambent blue flame of the needle as it twisted on its universal joint.

"Where points the needle," I told her, "there is the princess' fabulous bracelet."

"You have seen the princess of Werg?" she questioned me.

"From afar," I made answer. "I could never forget the glorious masses of sun-golden hair which adorn her head. I have no fear I shall know her when she comes to my sight."

SHE nodded and smiled at me. "You need not fear that I will reveal you," she said in a voice that had turned low and thrilling. "I myself am not native to this land. I was a slave, serving in the palace of one of the lesser nobles. Deodum is a canal thief by profession, but in selling his stolen wares at the palace, he saw me and carried me off, unknown to all. His intentions," she flushed but her lovely eyes did not lower, "were not of the best."

I made bold to take her hands in mine.

Standing there, I realized that time, precious to me at this hour, was slipping. Before me stood the girl of my heart, but even more important to me was the welfare of my princess and her fateful bracelet. These I must attain at any cost, even the loss of my beloved.

"I must go," I said slowly. "It was the hand of fate that directed me to meet my destiny here. For you are my destiny. You must know that, ere I go." I smiled. "I should like to take your name with me, wachin."

"Thilna," she made answer, making no attempt to free her imprisoned hand. "Thilna of Jaray."

She nodded quickly, her eyes bright. "Yes. You are well known, even in Jaray, Darak of Werg," she said quietly, and then the look in her eyes became urgent, supplicating. "You must return here with the coming of dawn!"

"You ask me that?" I said slowly.

"Yes, for in the city the sun will only bring death upon you, and it will bring discovery of me, and no good to either of us. You will return, even though you find no trace of the Princess of Werg, or her bracelet."

I drew her to me then and kissed her full on the lips. A moment we thus stood, while the cry of a yammir rose full upon the night from the desert waste.

I released Thilna with a heart pang that it might be for the last time that I held her thus.

"I will return with the dawn," I promised, looking deep into her violet eyes. Then I turned, and without a word bounded up a companionway to the deck. There I stumbled over Deodum, and thinking that Thilna might perchance trip over him, I heaved him into the deep, chill waters of the Thasser.

I followed after, but Deodum and I went in opposite directions, you may be sure! I swiftly sped across the broad bosom of the Thasser toward the city, and having dragged myself from the canal stood there, dripping, ever cautious. There was no wharf, nothing but the dank mudflats.

Some three hundred feet up the slope, the city of Jador commenced to come into being, and toward this I sped, following the direction in which the lambent needle pointed.

And the needle pointed toward the danger-ridden palace of the Empress of Mars!

That was where I would go.

CHAPTER III

Flight from Cammint

SKIRTING sidestreets, wending my way along through the dim underworld section, my path led me toward the royal palace.

What would be my entrance, what my method of serving my princess, of escaping with her, of bringing to fruition my plans, I was, in all truth, not aware. Yet I knew that these things must be done, if the glory of Werg were not to be swept from the face of Mars.

Without plan, without disguise, I, a Wergite, recognizable as such in sufficient light, stalked through the demimonde of Jador. Chance alone it would be, I knew, that would present to me a workable plan. And so it was!

INTO my sight came as abandoned and bloodthirsty a scene as can be imagined! A dozen harrans there were, full decked in their finery, swords glinting dully, faces wild with the joy of combat, and standing them off were a mere four men, giant in build, savage and bearded of face. In swordplay and numbers they were illy matched, yet were going at it with courage and audacity that was little short of heroic!

Not long did I watch, but leaped forward into the thickest of the battle, my lips curled. Well enough I knew the tactics of these harrans. Cruel, bloodthirsty, conscienceless devils with hearts of iron. Well enough I knew their sport, parading up and down the sidestreets of Jador, for entertainment slaughtering needlessly all who stood in their way.

"Have at you then!" I cried, and threw myself into it with fervor. Now there were a dozen harrans against the five of us, but at that moment the odds

turned. It was luck alone which enabled me to put the fear of their gods into them, those harrans, for in the first second of my entering, one of them succumbed to the bite of my blade, and, decapitated, lolled to the cobblestones in a pool of blood.

We pressed them, those four ruffians and I, and slaughtered them one by one. Blood lust rose up in me. Lunge, parry, lunge, counterpoint, feint—death!

Our feet scuffed the alley stones as we pressed them backward, though our breath was rasping. With the suddenness of thought, our assailants were cut down to one gasping, death-fearing harran, a colonel in the service to judge by the stars on his shoulder. But he asked no quarter, and would have expected none. With courage that was magnificent, his blade was like a web of sparkling light as it fended off our five bloodstained weapons.

He snarled as he fought, backed into a cul-de-sac. Now, abruptly, my companions in the fight stood back and left me to finish him off, but ere I could beat down his guard, a sudden thought came to me.

I redoubled my efforts on him, leaped in under his weapon, and with a final stroke struck it singing away into the night. Then I stepped forward, pressing my blade to his midriff. He dropped his arms, and stood rigid, face a mask.

Abruptly I faced the men at my back.

"Be gone with you!" I cried. "Here's my prisoner, my sport, and to what purpose I put him is no concern of yours.

As one man, they muttered "Aye," and melted away into the foul night.

I TURNED back to my man, and pressed my weapon harder. "I have no desire to kill you," I snarled. "But

suppose I spare you—what profit in it for me?"

He said stiffly, "On the other hand, what profit in the body of a dead man? What's the price of my life?"

I told him outright, and he looked at me sharply.

"Truly," he said angrily, "treachery to my Empress is too much to ask! Run me through, but I'll not let an assassin into the Royal Palace!"

"I promise you that no harm will come to the Empress Flavia," I told him patiently. "Nor shall I seek to destroy the palace. My sole intention is primarily to rescue the Princess of Werg, secondly to take back the Royal Hinusian Bracelet.

I looked him square in the eyes, and finally he nodded. Harran or not, beast or not, there's honor in the soul of most men, and there was a promise in this man's eyes that would be kept.

I dropped my weapon, and explained my desires more fully.

He frowned in thought. "A small request, hoepx,"* he said carelessly. "I think the trick can be turned. I have a friend doing penal duty in the menial's wing. You'll remain here, and within the hour I'll return."

He disappeared without more ado into the noisome night. I sheathed my sword, and sank down upon the cobblestones, exultation running strong in my veins. Victory in sight, the princess once more restored to her homeland, with luck!

I waited, shivering in the chill Martian night, drawing my jacket tighter around me.

Later, came quick military footsteps out of the hemming darkness. It was

* Hoepx—a ferocious animal with a long, sharp horn atop its head, which serves almost the same capacity as a sword in its manner of fighting. The Hoepx has been known to vanquish a master swordsman. Its movements are lightning swift.—*Fauna of Mars, Settlement Survey.*

the colonel. Without a word, he commenced to disrobe, and I struggled into the gold braid and leather finery of his rare Uxillian silk habiliments. I clapped his fur broad-cap to my head, and stood to attention with gauntleted hand clasping the hilt of my jewel-shot sword. He nodded grimly.

"You'll pass, hoepx," he said grimly. "The casque rounds out your face somewhat, so that you may be assumed to be a Crillian." He stooped, began to strip from one of his dead comrades, accouterments somewhat spattered with blood. "A like enough story for me," he said musingly. "Struck down in an alley-way, after I had received the special permit; stripped and left naked.

. . . The aeroplane you'll find ready to fly at Cammint Field. My credentials, my authorization for entrance to the Royal Palace, all there, in an inner pocket. But may you be shot down within the hour. I've performed my half of the bargain."

"May you continue to perform it, by saying nothing." With this final word, I strode off into the night.

WITH quickening pace, for the tiny moons of Mars were rising ever higher, swallowing the night, I went forth on Jharath Way, with the bright light of street-glow lighting my Werigite features all too strongly.

About me swarmed the higher classes of Crillians. No woman, for such would be dangerous; but men, great, full-chested giants, with jet black hair, swinging easily along, saw-tooth capes billowing out behind them, fine, jewel-encrusted swords clanking at their booted hips. And men with the stripes of the Royal Guards, and the Royal City Guards, as well as harrans from the polar wastes and outlying districts.

Through all this I wended my way, feeling that the eyes of every harran

who passed were fastened upon me in suspicion. Truly I, Darak of Werg, was in a hornet's nest.

I had all but reached my destination, and was crossing the square into the quieter section of the town opposite the beginnings of Upper Jador, the palace of the Empress rising into sight a scant five miles distant, Cammint Field across the block, when a hearty voice bellowed, in the Crillian tongue.

"Viel, by the gods!" and a heavy hand clapped me on the shoulder. For the moment my blood froze, and almost I was of a mind to whip out my blade and have at the man on the spot. But that were folly, indeed, so that I turned, and beheld a 'brother' colonel.

The hearty look on his bearded face fell away, and he blinked in confusion.

"Your pardon," he muttered, surveying me narrowly. "Almost I could swear that no other harran in the service wears such a cocky, ice-white ostrich plume in his casque as Viel. But no matter!" He laughed. "A silly mistake!" And he was off, albeit turning his head back puzzledly.

A narrow escape, if escape it was, and the blood was again tingling in my veins. Pray God that harran's suspicions did not remain, else I were dead in all truth.

But no time for useless fears! I quickened my step across the square, swung through the portals of Cammint Field past the gateman, who thought my uniform voucher enough for my right to enter. I went straight across the field, across the red-grassed tarmac.

There was a sleepy mechanic in a booth. I hailed him angrily.

"You've attended to my bee-wing,*

*The bee-wing is the airplane of Mars. It is an ancient invention, and the only fuel possible for its operation is radium, rapidly becoming the scarcest of Martian elements. Therefore, the bee-wing is a highly prized possession of any Martian.
—Thompson's Sociology of the Martian Nations.

rogue?" I shouted menacingly. He scrambled to his feet, a lanky lad, anxious to please a man with stars on his shoulder.

He beckoned and crossed the field toward a bee-wing, I following.

In a moment I was in possession of the craft, and no hand to stay me. I leaped aboard, stood before the control panel, and worked the levers. The elliptical wings of my craft began to beat the air rapidly, until they were a blur to my sight; until they made such deep, roaring buzz that sound of the outside world was gone entirely.

Exultantly, I strained my eyes out over Cammint. Empty, no staying hand! Good enough! But wait, what was that?

FAR across at the entrance, a harran officer came running through, waving his arms.

The game was up? No, by God! and I rammed home the final plunger, and the bee-wing took off flapping up into the thin air and forward with such speed that in a matter of seconds Cammint was a dot of light in the darkness, and the city of Jador was sprawled in fantastic shadows below.

I went blind, without lights, never knowing when some similar craft might blunder out of the encircling darkness full tilt into me.

I set my course for the Royal Palace, and had my forward needle guns set for any who dared offer me hindrance.

The palace loomed out of the starry night like a gaunt finger pointing out my doom, and I drove for it, speculating on my destiny. Did death for me and my princess lie there, or were the gods of my fathers to give me carte blanche to walk through all the monstrous dangers ahead unscathed?

Tight-lipped, I muttered, "For my princess, and all else must be forgot!"

Yet, I persisted in forgetting my princess, whom I had never seen face to face. The face of Thilna, that delicate, serene, divinely lovely face of the girl in the houseboat on the Thasser, rose insistently before my mind's eye. Would I ever see her again, hear her low, thrilling voice? Pray the Gods I did! For I had spent such short, swift-slipping moments with her—I, who hoped with the devil's own optimism to spend the rest of my days in the sunshine of her smile.

The Royal Landing Stage, on the palace roof! My hand steady on the helm, yet trembling withal, I dropped the bee-wing, brought the craft to rest on the composition roof. The wings flapped down to a nothingness of motion. With huge bravado, but unease in my heart, I dropped to the roof, and stood waiting.

CHAPTER IV

Parah Leeah

THREE harrans came striding toward me, faces grim, gauntleted hands to sword. Two were merely bokkas, without rating; the other, to judge by the gold and bronze of his caparison, was a captain in the service. But scant respect did I, in my disguise as a superior officer, expect from the captain, for in one regiment even a bokka owes neither fealty nor obedience to any officer in another.

"Your business?" rasped out the harran captain without preliminaries. "Quick about it!"

"Too much mouth and too little ear is often a guarantor of a short life," I responded coldly, striding up to him. "I come from Cammint, with a special permit and order from Lieutenant-General Groton Loj of the Ruiri battalions. My regiment is leaving for the Hahil-

lian front tomorrow — forced march, you understand, and I have a debt which I must extract from a—friend." I put a wry significance on the last words.

I could see him relenting, but he held out an imperious hand for the permit and my credentials. He scanned them sharply, handed them back, and then motioned the two bokkas forward. Quite impersonally, they divested me of my jeweled sword and of my other weapon, a single dirk. And I, weaponless in the midst of peril, could do little more than comply with grace.

"You'll claim those when you return," the captain growled. "And as for your friend, a poor class of friend he is, and a long descent you'll make reaching him, doing detail work—in the servant's wing!" He laughed harshly. "Get along, then!"

No need of a further invitation! I made for the sky-ramp. At the farther end I saw a staircase and made for it.

Still feeling deeply the loss of my weapons, I descended, emerged into another corridor, unused, apparently, save as a guardroom. The laughter of a dozen lounging harrans greeted me.

"Peacock!" jeered one, no doubt taking cognizance of the ostrich plume projecting upward from my casque. I paused, loathe to engage in combat at this time, yet resenting the jeer to the full. A repetition of the taunt, and a round of hoarse laughter decided me.

I wheeled to the harran who had spoken, a slim fellow with malicious devilry in his eye. "It's safe to open your mouth against a man who's lost his weapons. Is that your class of bravery?" I cried furiously. "Had I my sword, I'd stuff your words back into your throat with its point!"

THE harran I addressed leaped to his feet without more ado, uttering

and oath fraught with insult. From one of his companions he borrowed a sword, and extended it to me by the blade; I grasped it, and without parley we were engaged.

In a trice, a space was cleared about us, and we went at it thick and heavy. No need to tell you more of that battle, save that the man was certainly no master of the sword. Tricks he had, but a blundering application of them that rendered useless his onslaught. I was scarce breathing hard, when he fell at my feet, inert.

I faced the others in silence, but none offered taunt or hand against me. I returned the borrowed sword, and then, without a moment's hesitation unbuckled from my fallen adversary's waist his glittering scabbard. I retrieved his sword, and in a moment's time was equipped once more with the weapons I so sorely needed.

So I swung down the staircase from that corridor, and continuously downward, running softly, wary of passing harrans.

Never had I seen anything to compare with this fabulously adorned palace. In all the universe, there is nothing to compare with the wealth of jewel-set bas-reliefs, the inhumanly carved statuettes that range the walls, the rich tapestries, the solid gold and bronze staircases. But admiration for those beauties? Nay! Rather, a hot burning anger against the inhumane Empress of Crill, who had wrested from her many subjugated nations their traditional treasures, and an unbearable annual tribute to boot.

And now, thirteen levels below, the lambent needle pointed out my direction—straight ahead! Here on this very level was my beloved Princess, if I had interpreted facts aright.

At that I stopped dead. Ah, would they dare strip from her wrist that

fabulous bracelet? Would they dare humiliate her as they had humiliated other royalty?

With an oath at these possibilities, I nonetheless determined that my path lay forward. And thus it was.

I crept down the lushly carpeted corridor, keeping in the half-shadows. Far down at the end of that corridor a light was burning, and there was one lone guard who patrolled with languid, disinterested step up and down before a heavily carved bronze door.

My best course of action, it seemed, was openhandedness, and thus with a bravado which is a misleading index to my bravery, since my heart thumped so that I waited for its bursting, I strode past that guard—almost, that is. Then, a quick glance up and down the corridor, and the scrape of good steel on gold as I drew my weapon. Our swords clanged twice—one fruitless lunge, a parry; and a final lunge which sent the harran to the cruel gods of his ancestors.

Quickly then, I gathered him in my arms, and dumped him without ceremony into the capacious interior of a gloriously inlaid vase.

THEN, for a moment, I patrolled up and down in front of the door, uneasy, distrusting my incredible luck. Miraculous, that I had descended this far, was so near my goal, yet so short of it! What lay beyond that door? The princess? Or—death!

In a fury of impatience, I put my hand to the knob. It turned, and I pushed the door open a crack. Darkness inside, save for a shimmering effulgence of light such as a woman—the Princess?—might keep burning in her sleep.

Another foot I pushed wide the door, so that I might slip through. I closed it behind me, and to my ears came the

sound of soft breathing. Back against the door, hand to my sword, I melted into the silence. Danger here? Guards perhaps?

My eyes fitted themselves to the gloom and I saw a large chamber, thick-carpeted, flanked with exotically designed tapestries, simply furnished with silver mirror and toilettries—and a broad couch of darkest parwood, curtained against the impurities of the night air with light purple gauzes.

And it was none other than the Empress of Mars who lay there, immersed in slumber, her beauteous, dark-skinned features as innocent-seeming as a child's.

And the lambent needle of my compass pointed with unswerving steadiness toward that couch!

Almost I burst out with a groan. Where now to find the Princess of Werg?

Useless thoughts to plague me in this dangerous moment! I crossed the room, looked upon the perfect features! My hand tightened on my sword hilt, and slowly I withdrew it.

Assassination? Before the gods, I knew I could never play a part in such an act. Were she to rear up, dagger in hand, face contorted with her innate cruelty, and lunge at me in death passion, I could have struck, and thus in part have ridded my planet of her decadent influence. But murder a woman, or even a man in sleep? Not I!

But the bracelet? For that I would go through fire.

Very quietly I withdrew the arm of the Empress from beneath the silken coverlet, and my breath caught in my throat as I thus revealed to my sight the Royal Hinusian Bracelet. Softly I withdrew it. In my palm I lay it, and seemingly there was a pool of light in my hand. A changing, shifting wonder of sparkles and prismatic brilliances,

that well-nigh hid the deepest shadows in the room. I gazed with fascination at the ancient, precious *liazzes** set into the texture of a subtly wrought metal weave, for never had I beheld the Bracelet this close.

I deposited it quickly in the pocket of my skin-like inner garment, and in the same moment the Empress moaned and tossed in her sleep. Abruptly her eyes opened, and in the same moment I saw consciousness, full, sharp, enter them.

YET, with the miraculous poise and control of true royalty, she made no slightest motion, save that her face was swept with rage.

"What do you do here, harran?" she whispered tensely.

"Quiet!" I hissed, and presented the point of my blade to the whiteness of her throat. "Else the land of Crill may lose its Empress!"

Poised thus, thinking out some means of wresting from her my princess' location, I must have missed the sigh of the opening door.

"You'll drop your weapon, Wergite," said a soft, gentle voice with unmistakable meaning.

Resist? That were folly, if, as I suspected, the man held a weapon which could act devastatingly over a distance

of twenty sword-lengths. With blind anger gripping me, I nonetheless turned and faced my captor.

He was not of great stature, nor yet of great strength, from his looks, yet here, I knew, stood a man of vast will and moral strength. No Crillian this, with hard round face and hook nose, but a man of some far country, to judge by the even lean cut of countenance. I was struck by his pale hazel eyes, and the sheen of skin stretched tight over his cheekbones, so that a magnetic aura of living force seemed to leap out at me. And it was that feeling of vast will in his eyes that made me sheath my sword, and not the threat of that fabulously scarce weapon in his hand whose lower-order rays can incinerate a man at twenty sword-lengths.

The Empress came upright on her couch, shielding her naked body with a silken coverlet. Her voice lashed out, "Well, Paran Leeah, why is that you wait? You saw his intentions, to loot me of my bracelet, to murder me in my sleep! Have done with him!"

"Your bracelet, Flavia?" His brows went up as he eyed her through the gloom. He slowly shook his head, and his voice deepened tensely. "By the gods, Flavia, what is this empire lust that runs so strongly through your body? You've desecrated half of Mars, subjugated a dozen nations and a hundred free cities. Still not content with these riches, you must snatch from within her country's borders the Princess of Werg and that bracelet which is so useless in Crill!"

She half spat at him in her ire. "Truly, Prince Consort though you be, Paran Leeah, you go too far. I'll have your head for this, if you persist!"

"You'd sign my death warrant to-night," he said, with half-contempt, "and by the morning you'd be begging my forgiveness with lips of love."

* *Liazzes*—precious stones, peculiar to Mars. They have magnetic properties, which seem to have some connection with the Magnetic Poles of Mars, reacting to them to throw off rays whose range lies somewhere near the cosmic range, considered of great benefit to health. Observations have proven the truth of this contention, and it is to be regretted that they are so scarce. The existing jewels are set into the Famous Hinusian Bracelet, emblem of royalty of Werg, situated at the North Magnetic pole. It is the custom for the Empress, or the Princess of Werg to wear the bracelet, for the beneficial effect to her health, and therefore to the future ruler of the nation. Its national importance far supersedes that of any earthly crown.
—Thompson's *Sociology of the Martian Nations*.

His eyes softened on her as she sank back on her couch, speechless, eyes blazing.

"Cruel, cruel," he said, shaking his finely molded head, and he sighed. "And now I have news for you that will not sit well on your ears. You've been humiliating the Princess of Werg by allotting her menial tasks in the servants' wing, and now you've paid for your folly."

HER eyes widened. "Gone, then?" "Gone," said the gently voiced Prince. "How I do not know, save that tradesmen are daily admitted through the postern of the palace at the rear. Ere this, servant girls have thus been taken by lustful hucksters."

As he spoke, a slow flush of disdain crept over her face. "What care I that she has gone then?" she cried. "I had no desire other than to humble her and her royal family, to demonstrate how pitifully short a time it shall be ere Werg is subjugated, enslaved even as was its princess."

"Subjugate Werg, whose invulnerable fortresses are nature itself?" He shook his head, as his eyes swung back to me. "An impossible task, my Flavia. And now, Wergite," and there was strange fire in his voice, "you will come with me."

I was baffled, trying to fathom his purpose. But nothing loath, expecting anything from death to outright freedom, I moved toward the door, still under the compulsion of his flame pistol.

The Empress, she who owned one-half of Mars, and was bent on owning the other, flung herself in front of him. "My bracelet!" she panted pleadingly. "Paran Leeah!"

He brushed past her, this little man. "A mere bauble in Crill," he said without inflection, "but life itself in Werg!"

And the door closed on the Empress Flavia, into whose eyes I had seen leap a fury indescribable.

"For the moment I am your ally," Paran Leeah murmured as we moved down the corridor, and came to the staircase. "But remember you are also my prisoner. Continue down the stairs, and move swiftly!"

A fantastic, meaningless situation! I could hold no hope and yet no fear.

But we moved swiftly, well-enough, down through level after level, for it was apparent that Paran Leeah, who surely seemed all-powerful, was in fear of some danger from behind.

Thus we reached ground level, past guards standing like death-laden shadows about this vast hall, turned right and trod a long, chill, lightless corridor, when behind us I heard the march of swift harran feet!

CHAPTER V

The Lock Beneath the Thasser

"CONTINUE at even pace," said Paran Leeah.

Abruptly the harrans came through into the corridor behind us, and the figure of a captain of the guards stepped in front of us. True to Paran Leeah's instructions, I continued to move forward, and consequently the Captain of the Guards was forced to move backward, though his sword was out.

"Excellency," he said stiffly, "in the name of the Empress Flavia, I require you to give yourself into my care!"

"What is it you wish, then?" inquired Paran Leeah, regally, as if he had not heard aright.

"Her majesty requests your arrest, Excellency!"

"Very well," said Paran Leeah agreeably, never once instructing me to cease my stride.

"I command you to stop, Excellency!" said the desperate harran, sweat beading his face. "You and your prisoner are to be taken in arrest immediately, else I lose my head!"

Furiously he flung up his sword, presenting its point to my stomach. "You shall lose it anyway," I snarled, as I was forced to a stop. I felt the flame pistol of Paran Leeah taken from my back, and his gentle voice murmured, "Wergite, prove your sword-arm!"

Joyously I leaped back, whipped out my blade, and with a single motion swept the harran's away. His face puckered with a frightful rage. "Have at you, then!" he roared, and flung himself upon me.

Behind me I felt a terrific burst of heat. A wave of some fetid, noisome odor was borne to my nostrils. But so busy was I with my skilled adversary that not till many moments later did I realize that Paran Leeah flame pistol had sent eight good and true harrans to the understanding hands of their ancestors.

I was too busy with my man, for I quickly saw that he had earned his station. He had a lightning-like lunge and parry that had me fighting like mad, and filled this narrow corridor with silver thunder.

He drove me back at first, his face hideous with triumph.

"Die!" he cried, lunging, but I brought my blade down across his with such force that I like to splinter them both.

"Die yourself, harran!" I panted, and pressed him back and back until he was braced against a heavily barred door, fighting for his head, which doubtless the Empress would have taken later anyway—so that I felt no compunction when I struck his blade up and away, stepped under it, and pierced him through to the heart.

Ere I had a chance to gain my breath, Paran Leeah had rolled the bloody figure away from the door and was working a series of tumblers. The heavy, metal door swung away and Paran Leeah motioned me through.

I put foot to the first of a flight of steps, the unmistakable odor of the dungeon drifting into my nostrils. I turned sharply, to meet the eyes of the Prince Consort. He looked me straight in the eye, then placed the flame pistol back in its holster. He stepped through after me, pulling the door close. I heard it click tight.

He took my arm then, for there was naught save darkness here, and thus led me forward, on a path which took us past cells filled with the whimpering and pleadings and idiocies of a hundred outraged felons.

FINALLY we stopped as I felt the hand of Paran Leeah drop to my shoulder. There was a soft laugh in his voice. "Whatever inimical thoughts you have of me, Wergite, dispel them at once. For now we are fugitives from the same power, fighting together, shoulder to shoulder. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" I cried, for there was something inexpressibly noble and courageous about this little, strong-willed man. "But why should you, Prince Consort to the Empress Flavia, flee from her?"

"Because," he said somberly, "I am as much a prisoner in Jador as are those wretches in the dungeons behind us." He was quiet for the moment. Then I heard him working at the damp wall before us. I heard rotten brick and mortar fall, then, after a moment a grating sound, as of a door swinging wide. A wave of rotten, cold air rushed at me. . . .

"A forgotten passageway," murmured Paran Leeah, "of which none

save myself know." His tone turned bitter. "But come, my friend, we must away. Follow the walls of the tunnel," and desperate for haste myself, I turned on my heel and plunged swiftly forward into the damp blackness of that tunnel, the tunnel door swinging shut behind.

And as we moved forward Paran Leeah briefly told me his story, one that was eloquently bound up with the turbulent events on Mars of the last few years.

Five Martian years ago, Crill had been but a single large country, existing in peace with all other nations. When the Empress Flavia came into power, however, the peace treaties were thrown overboard, and Crill began an active assault on those helpless, unprepared countries on her flanks. Scarce three years had passed ere Crill became a vast empire, embracing within its borders a dozen nations and a hundred small principalities, and was raging avidly for yet more territory.

These wars of aggression soon claimed Hioppi, a country of which Paran Leeah was king. It had been a bloodless conquest, for Hioppi was ever a peaceful nation; and when Paran Leeah had been presented at the court of the Empress Flavia, she had evidently been so impressed with his quiet, godlike mien, that she had commanded marriage, her excuse being that she wished to consolidate relations between the two countries.

"I married her," Paran Leeah said bitterly, "with the hope of being able to influence her toward peace, but little I knew how tender, how pathetic, how utterly feminine she could be, at times. Falling in love with her has been my worse sin, and one for which I'll doubtless pay with many moments of heartbreak.

"When I found that I could not in-

fluence her to give back to her plundered nations their freedom, I knew that I must return to my homeland, to array my people for battle. But that were sooner said than done! For I found that I was a prisoner, under open arrest, unable, hardly, to leave the palace, and definitely not the city. Were I a man of might—one who could wield a sword with effect, I would long since have used this tunnel. . . . There is a step here, Darak of Werg."

We pressed forward, I still at a loss to name our destination.

"And for what reason did you choose the moment of my entrance into the palace for escape?"

He laughed. "My intentions were hardly thought out. Suffice to say, that I am of some official importance in the Royal Palace. Thus, almost in the same moment that I was informed of the abduction of the Princess of Werg, the roof guard was also informing me that news had come from Cammint of a Wergite, who, through some duplicity, had gained entrance to the palace.

"My first thought," he acknowledged, "was for my wife, Flavia. And as for choosing that moment, Darak of Werg, it was because, for the first time since my stay here, I found a sword-arm that would willingly back me up in my fight for the border. I have a flame-pistol, true, but it is not much good. One charge remains in it now, and I have determined to save that until it will do the most good. It is a long trail to Hioppi. It was a lucky thing which brought you to Crill, else I had made the attempt alone, finally—which, I make no doubt, would have ended with my return to the palace, or at the least, would have spitted me on the end of some harran's sword."

A strange tale, this! I now saw myself with a double purpose—to rescue my princess, an impossible-seeming

task, and to conduct Hioppi's king to the border safely.

AS WE moved forward, I recollected my promise to the wondrous girl in the houseboat on the Thasser. Despair welled up in my heart. I'd promised to return ere dawn broke, and it must be that now the Sun was making ready to struggle up out of his ancient bed. Would she wait for me, even though I failed in my promise?

With such thoughts to plague me, we again came to a door, at the end of the dank tunnel. I paused, not knowing where it led, but Paran Leeah bade me help turn a long heavy bar. Thus, with him pulling down, and I pushing up, a grinding of rust-filled threads heralded the opening of the door, or valve, rather.

"It has not been opened these past thousand years," said Paran Leeah. "I have traversed as far as this valve, but my strength has not been great enough to open it. Doubtless it was once intended for escape by some remote ancestors of Flavia. At any rate," he added, as we fastened the valve behind us, "we shall have a good dousing in the Thasser!"

"The Thasser!" I echoed in amaze.

For answer he pulled on my arm, and we came to the blank, damp, absolute end of the tunnel. He bade me reach upward, and my fingers closed on a huge wheel. It was set into the side of the tunnel, and doubtless operated a trap-door above us, which, when opened, would let in the cold waters of the Thasser.

Our first certainty that the Thasser was actually above us came abruptly, as the wheel turned. A stream of water fairly drenched Paran Leeah, but his only exclamation was one of intense satisfaction. As we turned the wheel, with the air growing damper and

chillier by the second, the stream of water grew in size, driven down by immense pressure, to judge by its solid, thought-destroying roar.

The water first lapped at our ankles, gained our knees, inexorably crowded up around our hips. We stood shoulder to shoulder, wondering if, perchance, we were to die like rats in a trap. I took the opportunity of divesting myself of my harran's finery, for its weight would not help me in the waters. When I'd finished, my only caparison was my sword belt and sword, a tough skin jacket and breech clout.

Paran Leeah gripped my arm. The waters of the Thasser now swirled beneath our arm pits. Again we worked over the wheel, until the fall of water became an intolerable pounding shattering against my ear drums. The waters surged up past my chin, so that I had to look upward in order to breathe.

I felt the wheel strain under my hands, realized that Paran Leeah was already under water, and signaling that we open the trap above us to its widest. I put my strength against it once more. It gave, and from the sound I was certain that the entire Thasser had forced its way in upon us.

In a rush the rising level overwhelmed me, and I scarce had time to draw a breath ere I was completely immersed, indeed half drowning. For a moment I reached out for Paran Leeah, vainly!

I let go the wheel, and shot upward, my fingers clawing for the opening. It resisted my frantic search, and sightless, drowning, holding my breath was a monstrous torture. And through my brain lanced the thought of Paran Leeah! Had he escaped?

NO TIME for those thoughts, if I were not to die at this moment.

I need not tell you how sheerly wonderful it was to grip the edge of that circular aperture, to shoot myself upward with every ounce of my dying strength.

What blessed relief it was when I broke through to the surface of the Thasser, gasping, eyes bulging, throat constricted! In another second my lungs would have burst, and that had been the end of Darak of Werg.

I opened my eyes, and flung away the hair matted wetly across my face.

"Paran Leeah!" I called tensely. No answer! I looked wildly about me, but—for this I thank my gods—the Sun had not yet risen and the Thasser fog was on the water. Nowhere was Paran Leeah, and in desperation I made ready to dive, a foolish thought, for already the waters of the Thasser had borne me far downstream.

Sobbing in my anger at having lost my benefactor and friend, I tried to fight upstream. Small use! In remorse, I abandoned myself to the insistence of the current, meantime taking note of my surroundings. Little though I knew of the Thasser, or indeed of Jador, still I knew that I was above that point at which the houseboat of the hapless Deodum had been anchored, where I had met the girl of my heart such short, eventful hours before.

I waited with bated breath, scanning each pier sharply as it slipped back and away. All manner of sound, strange, muted, distant, entered my ears. The gnawing scream of the double-headed wharf-rats, the cry of the hochin in the monstrous city whose towers and battlements loomed far up as ghostly shadows; the splash of some aquatic serpent rearing up out of the waters. And suddenly into sight came the pier opposite which Deodum's houseboat should be—but was not!

Now indeed, did I feel as if life were of no more moment, and in numb despair I drifted. I had failed to locate the Princess of Werg, had lost Thilna and Paran Leeah. Almost I abandoned myself to the freezing coldness of the Thasser. But then a flare of hope shook me. The houseboat, in common with others having no means of working its way upstream, must then have drifted downstream!

With this thought, I set my frozen body in motion, propelling myself through the waters with the slim hope that I could catch up with the craft, which surely must merely be drifting with the current.

After some time, during which the darkness had lightened almost imperceptibly, I saw a shadowy hulk form in the distance.

With joy, I redoubled my efforts, my sword, which I had dared not discard, dragging at me. The shadow grew, showing itself without doubt to be a houseboat, but whether it were that of Deodum or not I did not know.

I gained the gunwale, drew myself dripping to the deck. Thoroughly exhausted, I flung myself to the flooring, lay there panting. The warmth of life began to flow back into my body.

Abruptly, something hurled itself upon me. In a moment, I turned into a raging demon, fending off the creature, but I was too weak for combat. Something descended on my skull. The whole universe cracked, and consciousness faded away.

CHAPTER VI

Screams in the Night

WHEN I came to my senses, I was lying on a hard bench, the mournful lapping of the Thasser in my ears. As I opened my eyes I thought surely

that I had ascended into the heaven of my fathers, for it was no less than the face of an angel into which I looked.

The anxiety disappeared from her lovely eyes, and she smiled. "It must be a strong blow, I see, that could take the life of Darak of Werg!" she exclaimed. "But Paran Leeah—"

"Paran Leeah!" I muttered, struggling to my feet, and taking her hands in mine. "He escaped then!" Comprehension coursed through my mind simultaneous with a blinding pain through my head. Paran Leeah, of course, had thought me dead, and had thought me an intruder in the mist. He had drifted, even as I, had struggled aboard the houseboat, and convinced Thilna of his friendliness.

Then, without hindrance, I tenderly took her in my arms and kissed her—I, who had thought never to see her again. "I like to have died a thousand deaths in my fear of losing you," I said huskily. "Every moment since then my thoughts have not been of the Princess of Werg, but of you, and always you!"

She smiled roguishly. "Does my warrior wear his heart upon his sleeve, that a mere maid of Jaray should steal it in a momentary meeting?"

"Momentary?" I cried, clasping her slim shoulders and holding her off at arm's length. "Know you that that moment was as a thousand years, and all too short at that!"

Gently, she placed a finger to my lips. "And thus it was with me," she said lowly, and placed her lips tenderly on mine. "And thus we plight our troth!" I caught her slim body once again in my arms, nor yet did I ever wish to let go.

A moment later, perhaps circumpectly, Paran Leeah descended to the cabin from the port companionway. He stood looking at me wryly.

"Truly, Darak of Werg," he ex-

claimed, "it were well I did not see fit to use the one remaining charge in my flame pistol on the intruder who boarded us last night."

Laughing, I forgave him, and was about to turn back to my beloved, when a chilling voice rang in our ears:

"Ho! Houseboat! To anchor, and make ready for inspection, upon order of Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress Flavia of Mars!"

WE LOOKED at each other askance. Then, as one man, Paran Leeah and I ran up the starboard companionway, and peered out the small window of the door. Idling alongside our quarter beam, through the yellow waters of the Sunlit Thasser, I saw a low, red official cutter, manned by a dozen harrans gazing toward our craft.

It was daytime now, though the sun, a glorious blazing object, would set shortly. The blow Paran Leeah had dealt had rendered me unconscious for many hours, and during those hours, the houseboat must have drifted many tens of lothala * down the Thasser. Evidently, a general alarm for Paran Leeah and myself had gone out, and the soldiery was scouring the nation for us.

I grasped Paran Leeah's arm, and we quietly descended the companionway.

"Our best plan," I told Thilna and him, "is to say nothing at present." To Thilna I said, "You can swim?" She nodded briefly.

Urging them ahead of me, we ascended the port companionway, to the upper deck, and stood there huddled in the lee of the stern cabin. I looked around the corner of the cabin, saw the trim stern of the radium-powered cutter just as it edged past our quarter beam and ground against us amidships.

"Quickly!" I exclaimed, and mo-

* Lothala—a distance equal to one-eighth of an Earth mile.

tioned the two of them into the water. Puzzledly, but without questioning me, they obeyed, and Thilna lithely let herself over the gunwale, Paran Leeah following after.

In accordance with my instructions, they sank beneath the waters, Thilna throwing a smilingly reproachful look at me as the current bore her away.

At the same moment, came the grate of harran boots on the deck of the houseboat as they boarded it. My short sword still at my hip, I also let myself over the gunwale, just as a group of harrans came into view around the forward cabin.

I worked my way along in the shadow of the slanting hull until I was under the stern. The red cutter, a powerful craft, was now visible, manned, as I knew it would be, by a single harran at the tiller.

Swiftly, out of sight now, I worked my way, almost submerged, between the two craft, dragging at my sword meanwhile. The harrans had bound the two boats together with a bow line, a thick length of tough yamp. I could just see the helmsman, a lanky bearded fellow of great strength sitting idly in the stern, waiting for his fellows to complete their inspection of this apparently tenantless craft.

I drew my sword, and with a single, short motion severed the connecting rope.

In the same moment I forced the two craft apart, I drew myself swiftly aboard the cutter.

AT ONCE, as if he had been intuitively warned of my coming, I was leaped upon by the single harran. Indeed, so surprising was his onslaught that I was forced to one knee as I fought. And it were truly death then had I not, in pure accident, lunged against the cutter's port gunwale, caus-

ing the craft to list.

My assailant lost his balance scarce long enough to enable me to gain a secure footing, so that he drove me backward until I had the feel of his style. In a trice I had driven him astern, the while he fought with a ferocity that was magnificent. He fought hard, fiercely, and well, and snarling with rage, again forced me back.

As might be expected, the harrans stranded aboard the houseboat soon gathered amidships, yelling encouragement to their fellow, at a loss for a course of action. Most Crillians are averse to water, for some reason, so that it was not until the tide of battle had swung my way that a few of them thought to plunge into the waters to my adversary's rescue.

Then indeed, I saw that I must haste. Should another harran board the cutter, I were dead in all truth.

"Die!" I shouted, and lunged forward. For a moment our blades sparkled in the westering Sun with prismatic brilliance, the face of my man a horrible thing to see, so full of rage was it. I pressed him back, mindful of the necessity of his death. A single lunge, and my blade came away running with good Martian blood. My man uttered a despairing shriek, and plunged overboard into the freezing waters of the Thasser.

One of the harrans in the water had reached the cutter, and was striving to lift himself into the vessel. With grim humor, I ground the heel of my naked foot down on his fingers. With a howl of anguish, he let go.

Exultantly, with a final taunting laugh at the stranded harrans, I sat down in the stern and pressed the starter of the radium motor. No noise at all, here, but immediately the powerful craft began to put on speed, until the fateful houseboat of dead Deodum was

far astern.

Then I shouted out loud the names of Thilna and Paran Leeah. My heart almost filled to bursting when I heard a faint shout dead ahead. A few moments later, I held the cold body of my loved one clasped firm in my arms, and Paran Leeah was wringing the last ounce of power from the motor. We were cutting the waters of the Thasser swiftly, bound for Werg.

And now for the first time, I had an opportunity to talk with Thilna. She told me that sometime after I had left her, the docks had begun literally to swarm with harrans, and fearful that one would attempt to board the houseboat, she had, with some difficulty, to be sure, raised anchor, set the rudder, and drifted downstream, hoping I'd follow after. As Paran Leeah had boarded the cutter, she told me, she had almost pushed him back, until accident made him mention my name.

As we spoke, I noticed a peculiar expression on her face.

"Something is worrying you, Thilna?" I inquired. "There is scant need for it, you know. For three score lothala there is no human habitation."

"And after the three score lothala?" she queried, smiling.

I shrugged. "We shall have to abandon the cutter," I admitted. "For it is unlikely that we shall be allowed to use the Potah Locks, where the Thasser must needs drop to a lower level."

SHE dropped her eyes, frowning. Then she lifted them again. "I hope you will be able to forgive me," she said soberly.

"Forgive you?" I demanded. "And pray tell, for what? You speak in riddles, my sweet little one."

But at that moment, she had no chance to make answer. The Sun had long since descended into his ancient

bed, and fog was again drifting over the Thasser. In the last two hours, at varying intervals, barges, propelled upstream by slaves laboriously turning huge wheels, had been passing us.

Thus far, we had no difficulty. Our best move had been to act quite naturally, and openhandedly stand upright and salute the barge men. True, we possessed an official craft, propelled by one of the few radium motors on Mars, but, if given reason, most persons will assume much, and these that we saw assumed us to be in legal possession, since we certainly betrayed no appearance of any guilt.

Now I saw one of these barges plowing upstream toward us, a frightfully lengthy craft, as long as the canal was broad. Too well I knew how such a craft could block us if it so wished. If harrans were perchance aboard, I knew that peril certainly threatened us.

Now my worst fears were realized.

For, seen through fog of night as a long black shadow, the barge was hastily swinging about, presenting her quarter to us, and in a few moments more, our passage would be blocked completely. There were harrans aboard, for a fact!

Paran Leeah desperately played with the radium motor, but already the shaft was spinning at maximum. With a groan I saw that we'd not make it.

The thin air rushed with frightful force past our ears. That shadow in the fog grew. Paran Leeah was now heading the cutter inshore, toward the single, slim passageway that remained. Almost, by a hair's breadth, we made it in safety, but then the barge filled the gap. Paran Leeah swung the tiller, and I like to have gone overboard under the force of our swerve. Straight for shore, at headlong velocity, we went, and the cutter hit the mudflats with such speed that it flung itself entirely clear of the

Thasser before it stopped.

With Thilna in my arms, I literally leaped from the cutter, and fled into the night on the heels of Paran Leeah.

A score of savage voices rang out behind us, exhorting us to stop.

I set Thilna to her feet, and, her cheeks flushed with excitement, she ran like the wind beside me. Soon we had lost ourselves in the canal mists, beating our way across strange, soggy lands, known neither to me nor to my comrades.

We heard no sounds of pursuit, and felt justified in stopping to take council.

"And now," said Paran Leeah in his gentle voice, "where go we now? The Wergite border is certainly no more than three score lothala distant, which distance we cannot make in the night that remains."

Abruptly I tensed, blood racing in my veins. Out of the near distance, out of the night, came a scream to make the blood run cold. Again and again it came, a horrid, loathsome, bloodcurdling cacaphony beating nauseously out of the night.

"Jerai!"* exclaimed Thilna and Paran Leeah, all in the same breath.

As one, we ran toward the creatures who thus filled the air with their hideous cries.

* The favorite mount of Martians. An animal slightly larger than a horse, but possessing an illusory appearance of massiveness due to a fluff of silken hair which flows lightly all about them, giving the impression of being immersed in water. They are delicate limbed and bodied, utterly transparent, so that one can easily observe the function of every organ. However, there is no beast whose strength and endurance can equal that of the fabulous jerai. It has a fleet running motion which seems to float along without jar or shock from contact with the ground. The impression of a rider is that of swift skating on ice, minus the usual body motion, gliding along at express-train speed. A jerai can travel sixty miles without halting, and in a Martian day, can easily cover two hundred miles, carrying two riders.—*Fauna of Mars, Settlement Survey.*

CHAPTER VII

Pursuit of Death

ABRUPTLY we came to a high wooden fence. It was not constructed to keep marauders out, but to keep jerai within.

With a single whispered word of reassurance, I climbed the fence, and disappeared from the sight of my companions. I dropped quietly to the hard packed ground, the shrieks of the otherwise gentle beasts filling the night.

I made a series of low, clicking sounds, almost a moan, and with elation I saw one of the tenuous-seeming beasts moving out of the fog toward me. It rubbed against me, its marvelously long, silken hair standing out from its transparent body as if, for all the world, immersed in some clear-water lake.

I gathered three of the triple-legged beasts about me, and made off toward the corral gate, congratulating myself on my luck. Valuable animals, these, and this was apparently the royal breeding grounds, on which we had inadvertently stumbled.

I quickened my stride, and thus had the ill-luck to stumble upon a feeding trough—a thin, metal affair which toppled with a fearful clanging.

I broke into a run, but ere I reached the gate, driving my beasts before me, a torch flared out wildly, illuminating me in its glare.

A cry of many voices, a clamor, broke out on the night, and now, fearing again for safety, I flung open the gate, and with fumbling fingers, swung it wide. In the single look I had behind me, I saw harrans! True, the royal breeding grounds, guarded against rascals by soldiery!

"PARAN LEEAH!" I shouted, and was rewarded with a quiet voice in

my ear. Good! The jerais, intelligent animals, sat down when they saw what was wanted. I threw Thilna to the back of one, she being well-nigh buried in the airlight fluff of hair. The pound of harran feet nearing us, Paran Leeah and I hastily boarded our mounts, and with a single, stroking pressure, to the base of the jerais' skulls, we were off, scarce able to see for the masses of hair in our faces. Those jerais will ever command my respect. Thin though their limbs, transparent their bodies beneath the fluff of hair, yet there is a speed and strength in them that surpasses comprehension!

We sped with hardly a sense of motion through the ghostly mist, the two tiny moons of Mars riding high above us, astride fairy creatures of silk and light.

For an hour, at what seemed accelerating pace, we were borne across land that had now become desert, fog gone, and safety, so we thought, ahead.

But then, from out of the distance, I heard the rhythm of pounding hoofs. My heart froze within me, as I realized that these jerais we strode were merely intended for the chariots of Crill, while those of the pursuing harrans were selected mounts, bred for speed.

Paran Leeah caught my attention. "Within the hour," he cried out, "they'll have us surrounded."

"And within the hour we'll cross the border into Werg," I made answer. "Onward!"

But though we coaxed our beasts to greater speed, and they seemed to comply, gentle animals, the sounds of pursuit grew.

Now, with Werg but five lothala distant, I could see our pursuers with the eye as I turned. We forged on, up and down the rise and fall of the desert, and once I caught the eyes of Thilna upon me. She murmured something I

could not hear. I smiled, gestured an assurance I did not feel.

Abruptly, I saw mountains rising mistily out of the distance, and a choking emotion arose in my throat. Could we but make those mountains, the hilly country of my beloved Werg, all would be well. But I saw no escape, for within the moment, our pursuers would have us.

But a moment later, I noted with horror that Paran Leeah was not beside us. I twisted my head, and saw that his mount had come to a standstill. I saw Paran Leeah jump from the jerei, and calmly await the oncoming horde.

THEY bore down on him, shouting fiercely the warcries of their ancient nation. Almost they were upon him, slight little prince of far Hioppi, but still he stood there.

Then a wondrous thing came about! The night turned into a hell of flame. The bulbous desert weeds reflected a vivid, leprous red. The stars, vivid though they were, were blotted out in that awful surge of brilliance.

I heard a horrible series of screams that quickly died out to a nothingness. A wave of fetid air struck my nostrils. All was quiet, now. I knew, then, that safety at last had claimed us.

A moment later Thilna, trembling from the reaction, was in my arms, and Paran Leeah's jerei gained our side. He leaped to the ground, smiling quietly.

He patted the flame pistol in his hand. "Useless now," he said. "But it served its best purpose. We are safe. I to wend my way to my distant, helpless country, you, with your mission fulfilled, and the girl of your heart in your arms," and he looked strangely at Thilna. He added, heavily, "But I—without my Empress."

"How say you?" I demanded, struck by that look he gave Thilna. "My

mission," and my own heart was heavy as I spoke, "is not fulfilled. True, I have the bracelet, and the princess of my heart, but the Princess of Werg is yet a prisoner in the land of Crill!"

Thilna reached up a gentle white hand and stroked my face. "Darak of Werg," she whispered, glorious eyes alight, "in your arms at this moment you hold, all in one, the princess of your heart, and the elusive Princess of Werg!"

I leaped back from her. "What say you?" I cried in shocked consternation.

"It is true," she insisted. "Paran Leeah, who saw me in the royal palace ere we met again on the Thasser, can vouch for me. It was the Princess of Werg who was spirited from the royal palace by Deodum, for his own evil purposes, on the very night you found me."

"But your hair!" I gasped, feeling as if the very universe were cracking about me. "It is night-black, while that of the princess is golden as the Sun itself!"

Paran Leeah, smiling with amusement, broke in. "I knew Thilna was the princess, Darak of Werg, the moment I set eyes upon her on the Thasser. It was the palace barber, a spy of Deodum's who dyed her hair—and it made an effective disguise. For there are no golden haired women in Crill."

Now the meaning came clear and rage rose within me. "You sent me into Jador on a fool's mission, then, when already I had attained my object!" I cried furiously. It hurt to be made a fool by her I loved.

"Your object was your princess," she said, with a flash of her proud eyes. "But was not the Royal Hinusian

Bracelet of more worth to Werg than a mere princess? Had I revealed my identity, you would not have dared leave me."

At this, I could not nurture my fury further, and taking her white hand in my own, I dropped speechlessly to one knee, so overcome was I with emotion.

Paran Leeah suddenly spoke, and I raised my head.

"I must go," he said, his fine eyes shadowed. He had gained his freedom, but had lost his Empress. "A long, happy life, to you, Darak of Werg, and to you, whom I know best as Thilna. It may be that someday we shall meet again, and may that day not be long."

"And may we meet again," I murmured as our eyes met in a salute that tokened our eternal friendship, "as King, once more, of Hioppi!"

Then he wheeled, mounted his jerai, and in a moment was lost in the enveloping night.

And I knelt at the feet of my princess, until she knelt beside me.

"Why do you kneel, Darak of Werg?" she said gently, tears sparkling on the edge of her lashes. "A royal Princess of Werg would not disdain in marriage the lowest laborer in the field."

She added, with a roguish quirk to her lips, "And my dear one, I hope that the mightiest warrior of Werg will not disdain in marriage the lowly maid of Jaray, whom he first met in the houseboat of Deodum on the Thasser."

Slowly I drew her to her feet, and full upon the lips I kissed her, my beloved, my princess in all truth now. And the scream of my jerai rose into the night, drifted off across the Martian wastes, as if to cement in fact a love which I felt the destruction of a world could not break asunder.



"IT'S a wonderful operation!" the surgeon exulted. "Oh, wonderful, wonderful—"

"Continue removing the bandage and cease gurgling with joy!" J. Worthington Throop, III, grunted. Mr. Throop was of the opinion that the III, which meant that he was the third person in his family to bear that name, was something of a distinction, but in the opinion of his close associates, the III meant that J. Worthington was the third in a line of distinguished stuffed shirts, bores, and general joy killers. His associates based their opinion not only on close observation of Mr. Throop in person, but also on the fact that he was a member in good standing of the Anti-Joke Society, the Anti-Drinking League, and the Anti-Profanity Crusaders. Telling jokes, drinking, and swearing even

with provocation, in the opinion of Mr. Throop were evil things. In short, Mr. Throop was such a person as would have no friends, unless he was rich. Mr. Throop was certainly rich. He had so much money he didn't know what to do—no, that isn't right. He knew what to do with his money: don't spend it. A penny saved and invested at five per cent is two pennies twenty years from now, was his motto.

Mr. Throop, some four weeks previously has been in an automobile accident, a calamitous affair that had involved much broken glass, the activities of several ambulance chasers, and no end of insurance adjusters. From the moment of impact with the second car, Mr. Throop had not been aware of what was happening. He had awakened in a hospital and had found himself



"I can't help it, officer!"
gasped Throop as he tore the
speeding ticket into shreds.

**J. Worthington Throop, III was a meek
little man, but this hand of his wouldn't
behave. It was bound to get him in trouble**

swathed in bandages and a surgeon staring at him with an interest that was nothing if not fervid. Mr. Throop had been pleased to discover he was the object of so much attention, especially when the surgeon, perceiving that he had recovered consciousness, had gone dashing out of the room and had returned with five colleagues, who had gazed at him with awe and admiration.

Mr. Throop had been somewhat let down when he had discovered they were not interested in him but in his right hand. Their attitude might have been summed up in the following words:

"About Throop,
We don't give a hoot;
But about his hand
Man oh man!"

"What is so unusual about my hand?" Mr. Throop had demanded.

The surgeons had not answered his question. They had advised him to go back to sleep. "We will handle the hand," they said.

Nor had they, in the month that had passed since the accident, chosen to enlighten their patient. When they changed the bandages on his hand, they did not permit Mr. Throop to see what was happening. It had become no end of a mystery; and now that the chief surgeon, Dr. Ezra Pincus, was at last removing the final bandages, Mr. Throop was greatly interested in seeing what had happened to him. Whatever it was, he was afraid it would be bad. When six surgeons got together and worked on a single patient, that patient could call himself lucky if he had any arms, legs, liver, kidneys—anything—left to call his own, not to mention his soul. But then Mr. Throop had never called his soul his own. Mrs. Throop had accounted for that.

"Get along with removing the bandages," Throop grunted.

"Haste makes waste," the surgeon

said gaily. He looked toward the door of the room. "Anyhow I don't want the hand revealed until my colleagues arrive."

"Until your colleagues arrive! Look here, I'm getting sick and tired of having forty doctors examine me every day, especially when they won't tell me what they are examining me for. Am I the patient in this case, or am I not?"

"You are the patient," the doctor answered. You got the impression he answered out of politeness and for no other reason.

"Then why do all these other doctors have to stick their noses into my business?"

"They are interested for scientific reasons, Mr. Throop."

"What is it about my hand that is so interesting?"

"I am not prepared to reveal that yet."

"Why aren't you? I demand to know. Am I paying you or am I not?"

"You," said the surgeon, with frigid politeness, "are paying me."

MR. THROOP relapsed into sudden silence. He had visions of being presented with a doctor bill that ran into thousands of dollars, maybe as much as five thousand. "I won't pay it," he muttered. "It's outrageous."

"What is outrageous?" the surgeon inquired.

"N—nothing," Mr. Throop answered hastily. "Where are those dash-dinged colleagues of yours anyhow? I'm getting tired of waiting."

"Ah, here they come now," the doctor answered.

Five men in white came trooping into the room. They ignored Throop entirely. All their attention was concentrated on his hand. With complete fascination, they watched the surgeon unwrap it. And when the last bandage

was off, they gazed at it in unrestrained admiration.

"Ah," said one.

"Good. Oh very good!" said a second.

"Marvelous!" said a third.

"Wonderful! Stupendous!" said the fourth and fifth, in the same voice.

For several minutes the surgeons stared at the hand without saying another word. Then the chief surgeon seemed to remember the presence of the patient. "Would you like to see your hand?" he inquired.

"Ding-dash it, yes!" Mr. Throop roared. "It's my hand. You ding-dashed right I want to see it."

"Very well," the doctor said, in the manner on one conferring a favor on a child. "You may see it."

The hand was strapped to the side of the bed and the bandages were piled around it so that it was out of Mr. Throop's sight. The doctor released the straps. Mr. Throop promptly jerked the hand up in front of his face.

He stared at it. The doctors stared eagerly at him, awaiting his reaction. He tried the fingers. They wiggled. He bent the wrist. It moved in obedience to his will. So far as he could see, the hand looked all right, except that a red line circled it at the wrist.

"What's so ding-dashed funny about this hand?" Throop roared. "Why have you kept me from looking at it for a month?"

"Does it work all right?" Dr. Pincus asked.

"Sure."

"Does it feel all right?"

"Certainly. But what—"

"You remember the accident?" the surgeon questioned.

Mr. Throop's mouth fell open at the question. Remember the accident that had put him here? As a matter of fact, he didn't remember anything that had

happened after the crash, but he was not likely to forget that accident as long as he lived. "Of course I remember it!" he shouted. "What in the ding-dash it anyhow—"

"Your hand was severed from your wrist in that accident!"

"What?" Throop gasped.

"Your hand was cut off," the surgeon answered.

"Huh?"

"It was lying in the gutter," the surgeon continued. "The men in the ambulance brought it into the hospital with you. I put it back on your wrist. That is the marvelous thing that has happened, Mr. Throop. I have succeeded in performing the perfectly marvelous operation of restoring a hand to an arm from which it had been severed!" *

"UCK!" said Mr. Throop. So that was what all the mystery was about! He had lost a hand and the doctor had put it back on. For a moment he stared at the surgeon. His mouth was working and all the doctors expected to hear words of humble appreciation issue from his lips. Mr. Throop, they felt, was going to tell the surgeon what a marvelous doctor he was. They waited to hear him express his praise.

"It—it—" Mr. Throop fumbled for words. "It—you say *it was lying in the gutter!*"

There was horror in his voice. His right hand had been lying in the gutter! Mr. Throop was a man who always

* Surgeons have made great steps in the direction of replacing severed members of the human body. Recently in the case of a young boy who fell face forward against a glass door and severed his throat (exclusive of the windpipe) is mute witness of the possibilities. Jugular vein, severed nerves, and cords were rejoined, and the patient regained full use of all, apparently none the worse for an experience that would have meant certain death in any other case. This occurred in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.—Ed.

knew what his right hand was doing. He never let it touch liquor, or cards, or indulge in light and frivolous amusement. Mr. Throop was a sober and respectable man and his hands were sober and respectable too. It shocked him to the bottom of his soul to discover that one of them had been lying, of all places, in a common gutter.

"This is awful!" he wailed. "This is terrible."

He was beginning to be afraid there was something that would be even more terrible—the bill this doctor would present. The surgeons seemed to think a wonderful operation had been performed, which meant that the bill would be a wonderful thing too. Mr. Throop put off asking about this as long as he could. At last he said, "Well, how much do I owe you?" His voice quavered as he put the question.

A happy beam appeared in the eyes of Dr. Pincus. The beam told the patient that this surgeon was quite well aware of his, Throop's, financial standing and was prepared to take advantage of his knowledge. Mr. Throop made some preparations of his own—for the worst.

The six surgeons immediately went into a conference. If they had been excited and interested about the medical aspects of replacing a hand that had been severed from the arm of its owner, the idea of presenting a bill for this service excited them even more. Especially when the patient was able to pay. The words that came from the group reminded Mr. Throop of the chant of the tobacco auctioneer. "Hi-li-li-lee-lee one-two-three-four-five. Hi-li-lee-lo. Sold!"

The chief surgeon turned to the patient. His eyes glistened.

"Well?" said Mr. Throop.

"My colleagues and I have decided on a fee of five thousand dollars!

"What?"

"Five thousand dollars! This was a most unusual and difficult operation."

"Five thousand dollars for sticking a hand back where it belonged and strapping it down while it grew back into place!"

"There was more to it than that."

"I don't care what there was to it, I won't pay this outrageous fee."

"No? The fee is reasonable, considering the circumstances."

"I won't pay it!" Throop shouted.

"I am afraid you have no choice in the matter," the surgeon said grimly.

"No choice?" Mr. Throop thundered. "I'll show you whether or not I have a choice."

"What choice do you have?" the surgeon inquired. "I am well aware of your financial rating. You are quite able to pay this fee."

"I have this choice," Mr. Throop said fiercely. He held the injured hand toward the astonished surgeon. "Cut it off again!" he shouted.

"What?" the doctor gasped.

"I said to cut it off," Mr. Throop firmly repeated. "I'll show you whether you can charge me five thousand dollars for sticking my hand back on my arm. Cut it off again!"

His statement, once the meaning of it had been forced home to them, caused the doctors to go again into frantic consultation. When this conference was over, the chief surgeon humbly said.

"What about five hundred dollars, sir? Would that be satisfactory as a fee?"

Mr. Throop admitted that this would be all right. He had scored a major victory, had saved himself forty-five hundred dollars, and was quite pleased. He called for his checkbook and hastily wrote a check for five hundred dollars. He was gratified to note that he could

still write. The hand worked perfectly. He handed the check to the surgeon. The doctor glanced once at it, then hastily back at it as if he doubted his own eyes, then he began to grin.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I didn't know you were such a joker."

Mr. Throop hurriedly dressed and left the hospital without inquiring why the doctor should have suddenly thought he was a joker. He was anxious to get away from the place before the doctors decided to call his bluff and cut off his hand if he didn't pay the full sum they had demanded.

He found Mrs. Throop waiting for him at home. She was a tall, angular woman and without her air of being constantly thwarted and oppressed, would have been beautiful. Each day he had been in the hospital, she had called to see him, as a good wife should. But if the doctors could keep Mr. Throop from seeing his own hand, they could keep Mrs. Throop from seeing her own husband.

"Worthington, what on earth was wrong with you?" Mrs. Throop demanded.

He told her, exhibiting the hand for her inspection. "The doctors said it was a most delicate operation," he said, a little boastfully. He was beginning to be proud of his operation.

"They wouldn't even let me in to see you," Mrs. Throop said accusingly.

"No, my dear, I know they wouldn't. They said visitors might impede my recovery."

"H—mm," said Mrs. Throop. "Were you well taken care of?"

"Certainly."

"Did you have a nice private room?"

"Oh, yes."

"How many nurses did you have?"

Not until then did Mr. Throop perceive the purpose back of this line of questioning. Mrs. Throop, in spite of

her husband's membership in anti-societies, harbored dark suspicions about him. She thought that the minute he was out of her sight, he probably got tight and ran around with chorus girls. He had been out of her sight for a month now and while she was certain he had been in the hospital—she had called daily to verify his presence there—she did not know what he had been doing. And—well, there were nurses in hospitals.

"What did you say, dear?" Mr. Throop stalled hastily.

"I said how many nurses did you have?"

"Two, dear."

"Two?"

"There were three during the first week," Mr. Throop hastily corrected. "Did anyone call while I was away? Did anything happen?"

MR. THROOP was changing the subject. Mrs. Throop pursed her lips. "Did you expect one of your nurses to call and see if you got home all right?" she asked.

"Oh, no," Mr. Throop said.

"Then whom were you expecting to call?"

"No one, dear," Mr. Throop said hastily. There were times when he felt his membership in the anti-profanity crusaders was a distinct handicap to his well-being. "Alice, I merely asked you a civil question. Did anyone call up to see how I was getting along?"

"Several people called," Mrs. Throop answered. She was letting him change the subject but it was obvious she was planning to bring up this matter of nurses at some future time. "One person was most insistent that he see you. A Mr. William Marks."

"William Marks? I don't know any one by that name."

"Neither do I!" said Mrs. Throop.

Her manner indicated that in her opinion this Marks fellow would also bear investigation. She looked at her husband. "*Worthington!*" she shrieked.

Mr. Throop's face had begun to shine with perspiration at her questions. He had pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to mop away the perspiration. As he wiped his face, his hand, without any orders from him on the subject, was thumbing his nose at Mrs. Throop.

"*Worthington!*"

"What is it, my dear?" Mr. Throop hastily asked.

"That gesture!" she said icily. "Putting the thumb to the nose and wiggling the fingers is a form of profane expression. And to think that you would do such a thing to me, your wife—"

"I didn't intend to do it, my dear," Mr. Throop said. He was greatly confused. He had no intention of thumbing his nose at anybody, let alone at his wife. It was the last thing he would think of doing.

"I suppose your hand did it without instructions from you!"

In point of fact, this was exactly what had happened, but Mr. Throop knew that for him to attempt to use such an excuse would get him nowhere. Accordingly, and not at all consistently, he chose to deny that such a thing had happened. "I didn't do it," he said.

"*Worthington!* Are you adding lying to the use of profanity!"

"Impossible, my dear." Mr. Throop was sweating again. And again he used his handkerchief to mop his face.

Before his horror-struck eyes he saw the hand that held the handkerchief, the hand that had cost him five hundred dollars, deliberately stop in front of his face, drop the handkerchief, firmly affix its thumb to the tip of his nose and joyously waggle all four fingers at Mrs. Throop!

The lady in question stared at this

astonishing sight. Then her face began to redden. She stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind her. Her attitude plainly indicated that she was thinking of going home to mother.

Mr. Throop stared in horror at his hand. "*Ding-dash it!*" he said. He looked at his hand, then in the direction his wife had gone. From long experience, he knew that times were going to be tough at home. In such circumstances, he had a place of refuge—his office.

MR. THROOP'S chauffeur took him to the office in the town car. In the back seat, Mr. Throop stared at his hand. It lay docily in his lap. He wiggled the fingers. They worked all right. He bent the wrist. It worked all right. With the exception of the red line around the wrist, where the wound had healed, and the fact that a month under bandages had whitened the skin, the hand looked perfectly normal. Yet Mr. Throop, who should have been proud of having it at all, stared at it with the distasteful expression usually reserved for rattlesnakes, Gila monsters, and scorpions. Mrs. Throop would probably not go home to mother. Yet he knew that many a day would pass before she allowed him to forget that he had thumbed his nose at her.

"*Ding-dashed hand!*" Mr. Throop muttered, glaring at the offending member.

It was lying in his lap when he spoke. The words had no sooner left his lips than it seemed to leap in the air and wave at him. He had the dazed impression that it was actually trying to thumb *its* nose at him, only, of course, it didn't have a nose.

The chauffeur heard the mutter of the owner, and in the rear view mirror, he saw Mr. Throop's hand waving itself in the air. He completely misinter-

preted the meaning of the gesture. He thought the boss meant for him to go faster. He promptly mashed on the accelerator.

Mr. Throop was so engrossed in his hand that he did not notice the car pick up speed. He didn't even hear the siren when it started. But he did notice the car stopping suddenly. He was thrown out of the seat.

"What is the meaning of stopping so quickly, James?" he irately demanded as he hauled himself back on the seat. He instantly perceived that the driver was not listening to him but was talking most apologetically to a blue-clad gentleman who was standing beside the car. "The boss told me to go faster," the chauffeur was saying.

"He did, did he?" the blue-clad gentleman said in a nasty voice.

The back door of the car was jerked open and Mr. Throop found himself staring into the angry face of a traffic cop.

"Where did you think you were going, to a fire?" the cop demanded, in the traditional manner of all officers of the law. "What do you think this is, a race track?"

"Listen, officer—"

"You were doing forty."

"A mistake has been made," Mr. Throop protested.

The officer had heard that one before. He knew how to answer it. "You darned right a mistake has been made," he said. "And you made it when you told your man to go faster."

"I didn't tell him to go faster."

"Trying to deny it, are you?" the cop said. "I clocked you on my motorcycle. You were doing forty miles an hour in a twenty-five mile zone."

"But—"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"N—no!"

Mr. Throop's hasty denial seemed to

make the cop unhappy. The officer looked as if he would have liked it if this law-breaker had started an argument. When no argument was forthcoming, he looked disappointed. He began to write a ticket.

Mr. Throop stared in annoyance at the policeman. There were many things he wanted to say but he suspected that none of them would further his own interests. After all, it was only a ticket he was getting. True, it was the first ticket he had ever received, but his lawyers would no doubt be able to take care of it. They had better be able to take care of it! What was he payin' them for, anyhow?

"Here," the cop said, handing the ticket to his victim. "Be in court day after tomorrow. Or, if you want to, you can report to the traffic bureau and pay your fine without a court appearance."

Mr. Throop felt greatly relieved to learn that the matter could be handled out of court and thus escape the attention of the newspapers, who were inclined, in his opinion, to crucify men of wealth over trivial matters such as this. He reached for the ticket.

His right hand took the oblong piece of paper. As though it had a will of its own, it passed the ticket over to his left hand, which grasped it. The right hand jerked.

The ticket, torn into two pieces, fluttered to the ground.

"SO!" the cop said.

"I didn't mean to do it!" Mr. Throop said hastily.

"No?"

"It was an accident."

"Yes?"

Mr. Throop had once seen a play in which the judges of the French Revolution had sentenced various nobles to

the guillotine. The judges had played with their victims, asking pointless questions, and their voices had had something of the same terrible tone that was in the voice of this policeman. Mr. Throop shuddered. "Officer, I swear my fingers slipped. I just underwent an operation—" He held up his hand and explained the details of his hospital experience. "I don't have any real control over my hand," he ended.

In spite of himself, the policeman was impressed. Mr. Throop watched the cop closely, to see if his story was going over. The cop shook his head. "I've listened to a lot of stories," he said grudgingly.

"It's the truth," Mr. Throop vehemently insisted.

"It's one of the best I ever heard," the cop said. "I thought I had heard 'em all, but this one beats me." He seemed to be in great doubt.

Mr. Throop held his breath. "Are—are you going to let me go?" he ventured at last.

"Well—" the cop said.

The officer was a fair man. He was willing to trade a ticket for an original story. "I guess I'll let you go this time," he said hesitantly.

"Thank you, officer," Mr. Throop said gratefully. He sighed and sank back on the seat. This had been a close call. He was lucky to be safely out of it. He reached out to grasp the handle of the door. His hand refused to co-operate. It jerked itself upward in front of his face, clamped its thumb against his nose, and with gay abandon wiggled its fingers under the very nose of the startled officer of the law.

"I guess that's an accident too!" the cop said. "Buddy, I'm going to take you down to headquarters and book you myself. I'll bet the judge gives you thirty days in the workhouse and

if he listens to me, he'll make it six months!"

Mr. Throop spent an uncomfortable hour at the police station during which his hastily-summoned lawyers frantically arranged bail. He would have got away sooner, except that, when called upon to sign his bail bond, his hand again asserted its individuality, this time by thumbing his nose at the desk sergeant. After this performance, the bond was doubled. Mr. Throop got out of the station only by resorting to the expedient of scrawling his name with his left hand and keeping his right hand firmly in his pocket.

In front of his office, Mr. Throop stopped to buy a paper. "Here, boy, bring me the latest edition of the *Globe*," he called to the newsboy on the corner. His manner plainly indicated that he wanted service and he wanted it right away. The boy approached slowly. He recognized this customer and he was in no hurry to give service. Mr. Throop never paid more than three cents for a paper. The boy didn't see why he should run his legs off to make a three-cent sale.

This time the newsboy got the shock of his young life. Mr. Throop pulled a handful of change out of his pocket, selected a half-dollar from the collection, and tossed it to the boy.

THE newsboy snatched the coin.

There was a glazed look in his eyes as if he had just seen a miracle come to pass. "Thank you," he said fervently. "Thank you, Mr. Throop."

"Hey!" Mr. Throop said wildly. "I didn't mean to give you that. Give it back to me."

He was stating the exact truth. He had intended to give the boy three pennies, never, under any circumstances, a half-dollar.

"You gave it to me," the boy said.

"Like fun I'll give it back."

Mr. Throop, in pain and sorrow, watched the boy skip blithely back to the newsstand.

"Ding-dash you!" he snarled at his hand. It was the hand, not Mr. Throop, that had given the boy the half-dollar. This was the foulest act of all. Nose-thumbing, while unpleasant to one of his views, was not necessarily painful. Throwing away half-dollars *was* painful, exceedingly so.

"You betrayed me!" Mr. Throop muttered. "You—you—you. Dash it, if I didn't belong to anti-swearing league, I'd tell you what I think of you."

Mr. Throop entered the building and sneaked furtively back to his own private office. His employees looked up as he entered. Then to a man, they looked down. An air of gloom seemed to settle over the place. Once he was out of sight, the employees began to whisper to each other.

"The big shot is back," said one employee.

"Yeah. Old Big Nasty. I saw him."

"Why couldn't he break his leg and stay in the hospital a couple of years? This was a decent place to work while he was gone."

With one simultaneous movement, J. Worthington Throop's employees shuddered and donned long faces.

In his private office, Big Nasty was little better off. He was doing some shuddering himself.

"Ding-dash you!" he was saying to his hand. Was the damned thing bewitched, he wondered? Had those infernal doctors worked some kind of black magic on him? Had they performed some sort of unholy rite over him, with the result that he could no longer call his hand his own? Were they in reality witch doctors instead of surgeons?

Mr. Throop's musings were interrupted by the discreet buzz of the telephone. "Your bank is calling," the switchboard operator told him.

"Put them on," he said. His bank had instructions to call him for verification of all checks over a thousand dollars that were presented for payment against his account. This was a safeguard he used to protect himself against the possibility of some person with no principles raising one of his checks.

"We are calling to verify a check drawn to the order of Dr. Ezra Pincus," the bank teller said.

"I wrote such a check," Mr. Throop admitted. "It was for five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred dollars!" the astonished teller said. "You must be mistaken, Mr. Throop. The check is unmistakably drawn for *five thousand dollars!*"

"What?" Throop shrieked. "It's a forgery. Don't pay it."

"Yes, sir," the teller said. "The forger is here in the bank now. Shall we have him arrested?"

"Certainly!" Throop thundered. He was outraged to think that a doctor would stoop to so despicable a trick. "Arrest the scoundrel. Don't let him get away."

"Very well, sir," the teller said.

MR. THROOP hung up. With unpleasant memories of the treatment he had received from the hands of this surgeon, he spent a few minutes gloating at the thought of Dr. Pincus in jail. "Serves the rascal right," he thought with satisfaction. The telephone buzzed again.

"Mr. Throop?" an irate voice said. "This is Dr. Ezra Pincus. I am under arrest for alleged forgery. It might interest you to know that I am going

to instruct my lawers to file suit against you for a hundred thousand dollars—"

"Suit?" Throop stuttered. "You're suing me! You rascal, what for?"

"For false arrest and for defamation of character!" the surgeon snapped.

"False arrest!" Throop shouted. "You scoundrel! I gave you a check for five hundred dollars and you raised it to five thousand dollars. If that isn't forgery, I don't know what forgery is."

"Then you certainly don't know," Dr. Pincus said. "I can produce five reliable witnesses—the doctors who were with me at the time—who will testify that the check you gave me was for five thousand dollars—"

"I gave you a check for five thousand dollars!" Mr. Throop gasped.

"You certainly did!" the doctor answered.

Throop's memory raced back to the scene at the hospital. He had written the check in a hurry and he quite clearly remembered that the doctor had glanced at it in astonishment and then had called him a joker. Had—was it possible—could it have happened—

Mr. Throop was holding the phone with his left hand. At this point he noticed his right hand, lying on the top of the desk. It was dancing madly, the fingers beating a brisk tattoo, as though it had just done the cleverest thing in the world.

"Good Lord!" Mr. Throop gasped. In a flash of blinding light, he saw the horrible truth. His hand, in writing the check, had added another zero to the figures, making the amount five thousand instead of five hundred! Dr. Ezra Pincus had accepted the check in good faith and had attempted to cash it in good faith. And Throop had had him arrested.

It was an open and shut case of false arrest, defamation of character, and al-

most anything else the doctor's lawers could think of! Unless he could talk himself out of it, they could sock him for anything they wanted to sue for!

"My dear fellow," Mr. Throop hastily explained. "A mistake has been made."

"Indeed?" the doctor coldly said.

"Yes, oh yes, indeed," Mr. Throop fervently agreed. "I'm tremendously sorry, old man, that it happened. You know how it is, mistakes will occur." He laughed, a hollow sound with no mirth in it. "I'm going to correct the mistake right now. One thing about me, when I make a mistake I'm willing to admit I'm wrong. Everything will be all right, I'm sure. I'm going to instruct the bank to honor that check for five thousand dollars."

HE WAITED for the doctor to answer. There was silence on the other end of the phone. Mr. Throop began to sweat. Was the damned rascal going to sock him with a lawsuit?

"It's white of you to honor the check," the surgeon said at last.

"Don't mention it, my dear fellow," Mr. Throop said. He tried to give the impression that he was only doing the man a favor.

"It's so white I'm going to do something for you," the surgeon said, after a short pause.

"No need to do anything for me," Mr. Throop said heartily.

"But I want to," Dr. Pincus insisted. A kind and forgiving note had appeared in his voice, a note that said all was forgotten and forgiven.

Mr. Throop sighed in vast relief. "Well, all right, if you insist," he said. He felt a pleasant inward glow. Perhaps the doctor was going to give him free medical care for the rest of his life. "What is it?"

"I'm going to deduct this five thousand dollars from the amount of my suit," the surgeon said. "I'm going to instruct my lawyers to sue you for ninety-five instead of a hundred thousand dollars!"

Bang went the receiver back on the hook!

"Ding-dash my ding-damned hand anyhow!" Mr. Throop shouted. He was fast becoming a believer in the black arts. There was no question in his mind now that his hand was bewitched. Holding it up, he clenched it into a fist and glared at it. "Blast you!" he shouted.

It was quite definitely a hand with a will of its own, as he promptly discovered. When he swore at it, it tried to punch him in the nose! He was glaring helplessly at it when the door of his office was kicked open.

Mr. Throop jumped. People entered his office only by appointment and with his permission. He looked up. A man stood in the door. Judging from his suit, which had a distinct sporting cut, he was such a man as might be seen around race tracks or sipping drinks from tall glasses in the better grade bars. There was a devilish look about him, the kind of a look that goes with a man who never needs to ask what's cooking because he already knows. He was glaring at Mr. Throop. Throop glared back at him.

"Get out," Throop said. "You have no business here."

The man didn't get out. "Are you J. Worthington Throop, III?" he asked. His voice had the same grim tones much favored by the hero of the old-time melodramas when he said, "Curse you, Jack Dalton!"

"I am," Mr. Throop answered. "What do you want?"

"I," the visitor said, "am William Marks."

He paused as if he expected this name to mean something to the man behind the desk.

"I don't know any William Marks," Mr. Throop said.

"Oh yes you do!" William Marks answered.

"Oh no I don't," Mr. Throop said.

"Oh yes you do!" William Marks repeated. Now his voice sounded like that of a school teacher saying to a pupil, "Oh yes you did throw that spitball. I saw you."

"Prove it!" Mr. Throop snapped.

FOR an instant William Marks looked non-plussed. His glare took on a doubtful appearance as if he was undecided about the mentality of the man sitting at the desk. Then he recovered control of himself. "I will prove it," he said.

"Do so, if you can," Throop answered. He had been searching his memory and he was convinced he knew no William Marks.

"You were in an automobile accident recently," the visitor stated. "You admit that, don't you?"

For a moment, Throop was inclined to deny it. He was not feeling at all co-operative. But he reflected that his denial could be easily proved a lie. "I was in an accident," he said.

"With another car?"

"Yes."

"I," said William Marks, "was the driver of the other car!"

He paused as if in his opinion he had made an important statement. Mr. Throop was slightly startled. It had not occurred to him that the other car would have a driver. Now he recalled that his wife had said a William Marks had been trying to get in touch with him.

"See my insurance company if you're looking for money," Throop stated. "I

pay them plenty to protect me. Now let them earn **their** fees."

"Damn your insurance company!" Marks said.

"What?" Throop gasped. The idea of anyone damning an insurance company was so preposterous that he could not quite grasp it.

"The thing you have done to me can't be settled by any insurance company!" Marks snarled.

"What are you talking about?" Throop demanded.

"You come with me and I'll show you what I'm talking about."

"Come with you? Come with you where?"

"Never mind where."

"My dear fellow—" Mr. Throop protested.

"Don't 'Dear fellow' me!" Marks snarled. "You either come with me and see what you have done to me or I'm going to sue you for a million dollars. I'll collect it, too. There isn't a jury in the country that won't give me a million dollars in damages. Are you coming or aren't you?" he ended, glaring savagely at his victim.

To such an ultimatum, there was only one answer. With a million dollar lawsuit hinging on his refusal, Mr. Throop would have gone anywhere with anybody.

William Marks led him straight to what, in Mr. Throop's circles, was called a *place*. Mr. Throop instantly recognized the place. He had often glanced furtively through the windows and had wondered what was going on inside.

"We're going in here," Marks stated.

"I can't go in there," Throop protested.

"Why not?"

"It's—" Mr. Throop lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's a saloon."

Marks seemed surprised. "So what?"

he said.

"I don't go into saloons," Throop stated.

"You mean to say you've never been in a saloon!" Marks gasped, horror in his voice.

"Never in my life," Mr. Throop said.

Marks gazed at him as though he thought he had just heard about the biggest lie that had ever been uttered. He seemed unable to realize that there existed a full-grown male citizen of the United States who had never been in a saloon.

"I belong to the anti-drinking league," Throop explained. "I can't go into saloons."

"You're going into this one!" Marks snapped. "It'll cost you a million dollars to stay out."

IN the face of this threat, Mr. Throop gave up. He hoped that none of his fellow members of the anti-drinking league would see him go in. He also hoped that Mrs. Throop would never hear of this. She would never let him forget about it.

Marks had an air of knowing what to do in saloons. He went directly to the bar and his foot climbed up on the brass rail as if it knew exactly where it was going. The bartender greeted him as an old acquaintance. "What'll it be, Bill?" the bartender said.

"Two beers," Marks answered.

"One beer," Throop corrected. "No beer for me. I'll have a glass of water."

"That's what *you* think," Marks corrected. "Two beers, Joe."

Two steins, foamy with suds, were placed on the bar in front of them. Mr. Throop regarded his stein with horror. Was he expected to drink this stuff? He wouldn't do it! He would show this fellow Marks!

"Watch closely now," Marks said. His voice was bitter and there was a

grim, long-suffering look on his face. He reached for his stein of beer. Instead of picking it up, he shoved it away from him. He reached for it again. His fingers refused to close around the glass. He lunged savagely at it. He only succeeded in pushing it farther along the bar.

No matter how hard Marks tried to drink the beer, he couldn't pick up the stein.

"See!" Marks snarled. "See what you've done to me."

"I?" Throop gasped. "I—" There were other things he wanted to say but he didn't get to say them. He was interrupted. He had been staring in fascination at the spectacle of Marks trying to pick up a stein of beer. Quite suddenly he perceived that something was looming in front of his face. He tried to shove it away. It wouldn't go away. It kept coming closer. He saw what it was.

A stein of beer!

While he had been watching Marks his accursed hand had picked up the stein of beer from the bar in front of him. Now it was bringing the stein to his lips. It was tilting the stein. Beer was pouring out. Since the stein was held firmly against Mr. Throop's lips, the beer was pouring into his mouth. He tried to force the stein away. It wouldn't go away. He tried not to swallow. The beer kept pouring into his mouth as the hand insisted on tilting the stein. In order to keep from drowning, Mr. Throop was forced to swallow. He had to keep right on swallowing until the stein was empty. Only then did his hand set the stein on the bar, with a loud thud that said plainer than words, "Fill 'er up again."

"Ugh—gulp!" said Mr. Throop, belching loudly.

"See!" said Marks bitterly. "See what you've done to me."

"I—gulp!"

"Yes, you!" Marks snarled. "I lost a hand in that accident, too. The people who picked up our hands got 'em mixed up and I got your hand and you got mine!"

"Ugh!" said Mr. Throop. "You mean to say I—I have your hand, and you have mine?"

"I don't mean to say anything else!" Marks snarled.

"Gulp!" said Mr. Throop. At last he saw the explanation of the strange behavior of his hand. It was the hand of William Marks. And Marks was a drinker, a spend-thrift, a rounder, a gay blade. Marks was a man who would thumb his nose at policemen, toss half-dollars to newsboys, and pay bills without looking at them. No doubt his hand had thumbed its nose at many policemen. And his hand, even when attached to the body of J. Worthington Throop III, had amply demonstrated its intention to continue with such activities.

MR. THROOP saw himself going through life tossing away fortune after fortune, drinking vast quantities of beer, and thumbing his nose at everybody, in a blind and un-ending effort to keep the damned hand of William Marks happy.

"Why—gulp!" he wailed, "does something like this have to happen to me?"

"Happen to you, sir!" Marks said bristling. "Damn you, sir, I'll have you know that I am the one who is injured in this transaction, not you."

"Injured?" Mr. Throop gasped, in bewilderment. How could the fellow be injured? Was he not wearing the hand of Worthington Throop? Was not that enough honor for anybody? How could Marks be wailing around about an injury?

"You're damned right I'm injured!"

Marks snarled. "Ever since I got out of the hospital, I haven't been able to take a drink. Every time I try to take a drink your damned hand shoves the glass away. Every time I try to bet two dollars on a horse race, your damned hand shoves the money so far down into my pocket that it ends up in my shoe. I'll tell the cock-eyed world I'm injured. My whole life is ruined!" Marks said bitterly.

"Gulp!" said Mr. Throop.

"Don't stand there and gulp at me!" Marks raged. "You have certainly injured me and if you don't do something about it, I'm going to sue you for every dollar you own."

"Gulp!" said Mr. Throop. The beer in his stomach was having an odd effect on him. It gave him a strange, a giddy, an almost pleasant feeling. He quite clearly perceived that Marks had been done a grievous wrong, an injury that money could not pay for. But what to do about it?

In a sudden flash of inspiration, Mr. Throop saw the solution for the situation. It was, like all great solutions, exceedingly simple.

"My dear Marks," he said. "Gulp!—Pardon me—I know just what to do about your problem—Gulp—" Mr. Throop broke off. Down the bar, a customer had just been served a stein of beer. Mr. Throop was watching his hand. As though it had eyes of its own, it was moving toward that stein of beer. He found it was pulling him along with it. For a moment, he tried to restrain it. Then he gave up and went with it. It snatched the stein of beer from under the very nose of the startled customer and shoved it to Mr. Throop's lips. He drained it without putting it down.

Marks watched the performance in sullen envy. "That's all very well for you," he said. "With my hand to help, you can take a drink any time you want.

But what about *me*, with your hand? What are you going to do about that?"

"I was coming to that," Mr. Throop explained. "My dear fellow—gulp!—why don't you try holding your drinks with your left hand?"

"With my left hand!" Marks gasped. "I never thought of that!"

With his left hand, he grabbed at the stein. It, the natural property of Marks, showed no reluctance at all in taking hold of the glass. In fact, it seemed glad of the chance. Both Marks and Throop were right handed.

There was a momentary flurry of resistance as Marks' right hand tried to interfere with his left. Mr. Throop, whose brain was now functioning with lightning-like celerity, solved that problem too, by grabbing the interfering hand.

Like a wanderer on the desert who has come at last to water, Marks drained the stein. He sat it down with a satisfied sigh and looked at Mr. Throop. All hate had gone from his eyes, all bitterness from his face, all thoughts of million-dollar law suits from his mind. He beamed fondly at Mr. Throop. Mr. Throop beamed fondly back at him.

"Fill 'em up again, Joe," Marks said to the bartender.

"Just what I was going to suggest," Mr. Throop said happily.

MR. THROOP drank innumerable steins of beer. He set 'em up for the house more times than he could count. Innumerable men who had been cold and distant strangers became friendly with him, and asked his advice about various matters, and told him jokes. Mr. Throop laughed uproariously at the jokes. He and Marks had become bosom friends. They were just beginning to warm up on a little close harmony when Mr. Throop heard a voice

calling him.

"Worthington!" the voice was saying.

Mr. Throop looked up. Mrs. Throop was standing there beside him.

"I looked all over town for you and then I find you in a place like this!" Mrs. Throop said.

Mr. Throop tried to get to his feet. He found the effort was beyond him. There seemed to be a haze in front of his eyes, but in spite of the haze he could see that Mrs. Throop was angry. Very angry indeed. Oddly, her anger did not disturb Mr. Throop. It did not disturb him in the least.

"Hello, old gal," he said. "Why don't you sit down and have a drink?" "Worthington!"

"A little drink will do you a lot of good," Mr. Throop said. He waved gaily at her, to show her that a little drink had done him a lot of good. As if in an effort to complete the demonstration, he reached out and gently pinched her.

Mrs. Throop jumped. This was the first time Mr. Throop had ever pinched her. She was startled. She wasn't used to being pinched, but she discovered, to her shocked surprise, that there was something nice about it. It was something a wife could expect from a loving husband.

"Oh, Worthington!" Mrs. Throop said. "Why didn't you do that years ago?"

THUS the story almost ends. There was still the matter of the surgeon and his threatened law suit for false arrest. Happily, this difficulty was easily solvable. Dr. Pincus, on being informed that he had placed the right hand on the wrong man, and was thus open to a counter suit for malpractice, was only too happy to forget all about the false arrest. Mr. Throop and Mr. Marks, after mutual consultation, decided to leave their hands as they were. Mr. Throop's hand on Mr. Marks' wrist exercised a beneficial influence on the latter, causing him to be more moderate in his drinking, and, as Marks freely admitted, "Did me a lot of good." Mr. Throop also received benefits from Marks' hand. He found a great deal of pleasure in tossing half-dollars to newsboys and since he had more half-dollars than he could possibly use, both he and the newsboys were made happy. He raised the wages of his employees—Marks' hand insisted on making out their pay checks in the amount it thought they ought to receive—with the result that his former wage slaves no longer called him Big Nasty, but referred to him as "that grand old man." Mrs. Throop having tasted the delights of husbandly pinching, shortened his name to Worthy. And thus he became known as Worthy Throop, a gentleman and a fine fellow, which was what he had always secretly wanted to be.

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AT ALL LEADING BOOK, SPORTING GOODS AND
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THERESA GOLL

PERHAPS one of the most famous features of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES (and of our companion magazine *Amazing Stories*) has been the lovely, fascinating "Mac Girl" created by H. W. McCauley for our covers. She has grown in popularity until she rivals the famous Petty girl, and the Varga girl. She has taken her place in fantasy as the Mac Girl and every one of our readers knows and loves her in her many beautiful impersonations on the cover.

We've received many questions about her. Who is she, Is she a real girl? Does she actually pose for these paintings? We've even gotten requests for her phone number. (Ed's note: We're not that foolish!)

And so, in answer to all these requests, we've decided to present the real Mac Girl to you. On this page you will find the real Mac Girl in the pose she used for the September issue, illustrating William P. McGivern's "Goddess of The Fifth Plane." Readers, we introduce you to the lovely, enchanting Miss Theresa Goll, of Chicago, who hails from the studios of Lee Parker of the same city. . . .

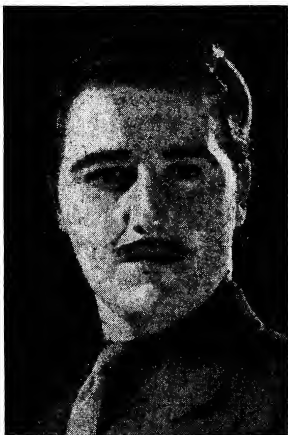
Come on, come on, jerk your eyes back to this column—we've got more to say that will be of interest to you.

First, actually there are many "Mac Girls." Miss Goll is one of a half-dozen models who pose for Mr. McCauley for cover paintings for your favorite magazine. Therefore, she acts now as a representative of her charming colleagues, and naturally does not claim all the fame that goes into the reputation of our McCauley lovelies. And we thank her very much for her charming gesture and her cooperation in satisfying the curiosity of the many admirers of the Mac Girl.

Miss Goll, called by Mr. McCauley to pose for last month's cover, stood before the camera for two hours while the artist photographed her in the several poses he conceived as possibilities for this particular painting. The picture you see to the left was the one finally decided upon as the best. It was from this photograph that Mr. McCauley finally painted his magnificent cover, which took him some two weeks to prepare.

Naturally, Miss Goll posed only from the photograph, and without the lion.

Sometimes artist McCauley embellishes the actual paintings with changes, and even though the same model may be used, the resulting "Mac Girl" might look somewhat different. However, in



HAROLD W. Mc CAULEY

this particular instance, a striking likeness has been achieved and maintained.

We might unveil a little secret here about Mr. McCauley's camera-work. Most of the Mac Girls are posed *au naturel*, for faithfulness of figure in his painting. But in this cover, the bathing suit portrayed the actual costume of the Mac Girl in the story very closely.

Miss Goll, who is a statuesque blonde, is blue-eyed and very vivacious. She enjoys posing for the covers of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES as well as for the many important national advertising posters on which her likeness appears. She is a favorite model of Lee Parker, and strikingly beautiful and able in almost any type of modeling. And her message to you is:

"I'm tickled to know you like the Mac Girl so much. I am proud to be able to portray one of her many alter-egos."

We could hardly introduce the Mac Girl, without introducing her creator, Harold W. McCauley. So we present a picture of him also, on this page.

When we asked him for a short sketch about

himself, we apparently set him a job that proved a bit more difficult than painting a Mac Girl. But he finally brought in several penciled pages of material. We'll try to build a picture of him from it, so that you will be able to envisage the man behind the most famous addition to fantasy in recent years. To quote at random from the information he gave us:

"I find that painting pretty girls is much more fun than writing musty old memoirs. . . .

"I arrived on his planet on July 11, 1913. My mother died eleven months later and my grandmother fell heir to me. In 1917 my father went to France to help make the world safe for Hitler to kick around twenty years later. He wishes now that he had the pleasure of meeting Corporal Schickelgruber at the point of his bayonet. Dad has entertained me many an evening with tales of action in the St. Mihiel salient and in the Argonne. Not to be outdone, grandmother has spun some exciting stories of her childhood among the Sioux Indians.

"I started work at twelve as a fire guard in a popular dance hall. The manager thought I was twenty-one at least; I was rather husky for my age. Two hundred pounds or so. When I had reached my tenth birthday, I stopped growing sideways and started upward, thank goodness.

"The next job was as a trainer in a dance marathon. Meanwhile I was studying aviation, and during my session at the drafting board, discovered that I could draw anything but what I should be drawing.

"The next four years found me a student at the Art Institute in Chicago. Another year working in an engraving house; from there to the American Academy of Art where I studied for a year. Then back to the Art Institute where I met and studied under J. Allen St. John who had long been my favorite illustrator.

"I would like to add that it was in 1927 that St. John introduced me to science fiction and fantasy. I just couldn't resist his beautifully illustrated jackets on the ERB books. Then I found I couldn't resist the stories inside the books. The next thing I knew, I was a regular *Amazing Stories* fan."

And there you have the story of H. W. McCauley and his very popular creation, the Mac Girl. We enjoy his visits to our office in the course of his cover work, and we believe he does too—being quite an admirer of a "Mac Girl" of our own, our lovely and very personable secretary. He wants to paint her next on our cover!

READER'S PAGE

DON WILCOX A FAVORITE

I certainly hope that Don Wilcox continues to write such good stories as he has been lately, after such stories as *THE EAGLE MAN* and *MADMOISELLE BUTTERFLY* I'm sure that he is the favorite of most of your readers. Costello has a swell story in *DUNCAN'S DREADFUL DOLL*, but I think it would have been better if it would have been longer. I liked the stories of the last edition in this order:

1. The Eagle Man
2. Hokum Hotel
3. Duncan's Dreadful Doll
4. Safari to the Lost Ages
5. The Weird Doom of Floyd Scritch
6. Headlines for Tod Shayne
7. Vitality For Murder
8. The Mystery of Shaft 13
9. The Return of the Hun
10. Men Scared of Nothing
11. The Traitor

There was only one thing wrong with the last issue and that was that you had too many time machine stories. Although I like this kind of story, I think three in one issue is too many.

ROBERT RABOURNE,
436 W. Young St.,
Pocatello, Idaho.

Don has many more fine stories coming up. As for being a favorite, we feel that he's destined to be another Burroughs—Ed.

A SCIENTIST CORRECTS

Sirs:

I just read The Editor's Notebook in the July issue of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* and find some remarks about *Cephenomyia pratti*.

Sorry to disappoint you, but that story is anything but correct. Since it happens that I had some slight connection with the whole matter I know precisely what happens.

This is the story, in proper order but without the names of the people involved: Somebody came back from the highlands of Peru with the report that this insect flies at incredible speeds. The speed was, lacking other equipment, checked with a camera shutter and *estimated* to be 800 m.p.h. The matter was turned over to the editor of a professional scientific magazine for publication. It so happened that I went to his office the next day and he asked my opinion about it. After getting measurements and weight of the insect from a museum specimen I set about with an

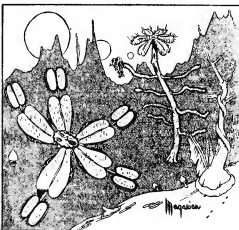
engineer friend of mine to make a few calculations. It turned out that the insect would need *ONE THIRD OF A HORSEPOWER* only to *MAINTAIN* that speed, not speaking about *ATTAINING* it. The report was thereupon published with a big question mark and then the scientists of General Electric went to work on it.

They found that the insect, *IF* it flew with that speed, would penetrate some two inches into the flesh of a man, that it would need even more fractions of one horsepower than my friend and I had found. Testing the optical aspect they found that the blur described would be caused by any speed exceeding 45 m.p.h. Thereupon somebody else tested the camera shutter method, finding that above 100 m.p.h. nothing at all could be seen. The original "reporter" than admitted that he was not quite sure and that the insect achieved a really high speed only above 10,000 feet in rarefied atmosphere.

It is now established that the original report was the result of simply incredible carelessness and that the real speed of the male insect is at best 60 m.p.h. Please publish the correction, so that this error may not be permitted to persist.

WILLY LEY,
304 West 24th St.,
New York City.

Thanks, Mr. Ley, for your letter. We certainly want to present the true facts in our pages. Your information is very much appreciated, and we



"I'm glad the interplanetary war is over. Those Earthmen were giving me indigestion."

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hope you, and our readers, understand that our source of information was supposed to be reliable, and therefore was published in good faith.—Ed.

HOLD ON TO GIBSON!

Sirs:

Regarding your August, 1942 issue here is what I think of it from cover to cover:

The front cover by Robert Gibson: It was superb, the best cover you have had in many a month. Hold on to this guy Gibson.

"The Daughter of Thor" by Edmond Hamilton: This story was swell, Hamilton always turns out good ones. I liked the plot and the characters, it's the type of stories I like.

"Tink Takes Command" by William P. McGivern: This was very good, not quite as good as the other Tink Stories, but nevertheless good. McGivern writes good humor, but I would like to see it in something else beside the Tink series.

"The Mental Gangster" by Thornton Ayre: The story was good all around, nicely written, good plot, and good characters.

"Mr. Ames' Devil" by August W. Derleth: This story was nicely written. I like Derleth's smooth style.

"Creagar Dares to Die" by David Wright O'Brien: This story was excellent. O'Brien is the master of space stories. I liked the character Creagar. More space stories by O'Brien.

"The Son of Death" by Robert Moore Williams:

Regarding the duel between Williams and O'Brien I can't decide who won. Williams' story was very good with its suspense and plot. Williams writes fantasy type of stories while O'Brien writes space stories. I think they were both excellent in their own field.

"The Luck of Enoch Higgins" by Charles Tanner: Very good.

"The Little Man Who Wasn't All There" by Robert Bloch: The story was as humorous as all the other Lefty Feep stories. Keep on publishing them.

"The Kid From Kalamazoo" by Eric Frank Russell: This story was very good. Nice plot.

The back cover by Paul: It was very good, but Paul's humans always seem doll-like. His drawing of machines is very good.

All your features are good. Keep them up.

GEORGE SERBINOFF,
Box 206,
Keego Harbor, Mich.

The artist who painted the front cover for Edmond Hamilton's "The Daughter Of Thor" is Robert Gibson Jones. You dropped his very unusual last name!—Ed.

A LETTER FROM HARRIS

Sirs:

Of course I am greatly intrigued by the generous, if somewhat flamboyant biographical note which you appended in the July issue. You may use this as agenda. As for my being "act-

ively engaged in Czarist Russia as a secret agent for a prominent world power," I can only state that I was, in reality, a commercial attache of a Central American Republic, interested in the possibilities of exporting bananas to Moscow.

However, in my travels through revolt-torn Russia, I came in contact with many noted figures, including R. H. Bruce Lockhart, the British diplomat who later wrote "British Agent"; William C. Bullitt, then a confidential adviser to President Woodrow Wilson; and H. G. Wells, the famous British author and fellow scientificist.

Russia at that time was in a turmoil, and I had numerous adventures in the course of which my life was in considerable peril. I was an unofficial observer on the staff of General Tukhashevsky, later "purged," when that brilliant Soviet strategist almost captured Warsaw.

In fact, if Poland had become another Soviet, the chances are that Germany, then seething with unrest, might have gone communist, with an incalculable effect on post-war European history. It is an ironic commentary that General Weygand, the French strategist who beat back the Russians before Warsaw, and thus preserved the social order in Western and Central Europe, was himself outmaneuvered a generation later, when Adolf Hitler forced his removal as French supreme commander in North Africa.

Nowadays, your readers might be interested to

know, I am brushing up on my military espionage, and am delving nightly into treatises by Captain Henri Landau, Canaris, Nicolai, and other great secret agents in preparation for war work.

In the meantime, I will be inducted into the Army sometime before the middle of July, if I pass the physical examination. As an "au revoir," therefore, I am now at work on my scientific fictional farewell, a little short story which I intend to call "Horace's Horrible Hours."

It is my intention to dedicate this story to Air Marshal Arthur Travers Harris, of the Royal Air Force, who bears the same name as myself. It was Air Marshal Harris who directed the recent successful 1,250-airplane raid on Cologne.


ARTHUR T. HARRIS,
Suite 207,
1200 Atlantic Ave.,
Atlantic City, N. J.

This very interesting letter speaks for itself. And we hope that after the war we will read your own memoirs as one of the great espionage agents of World War II. Certainly you will get some fantastic background and plot material for future fantastic and science fiction!—Ed.

THE EAGLE MAN

Sirs:

The July FANTASTIC ADVENTURES was tops! "The



WORLD *Inside* A PLANET!

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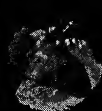
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Eagle Man" by Don Wilcox was undoubtedly one of his best works. Will you please urge Don to write another of Fire Jump's adventures? Fire Jump is one of Don's best characters since he started writing for *Amazing Stories* and *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* and I'll bet a lot of people will back me up on it, even Don himself.

St. John's cover was over and above just about any cover I've seen yet on *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* and you've had a lot of good ones.

If Wilcox continues to write about Fire Jump, please have St. John illustrate the stories.

Jack Fortado,
Box 314,
Rodeo, Calif.

Yes, we talked to Don the other day, and he agreed that he thought Fire Jump was quite a guy, and we hinted that maybe he could reappear in the future. You can be assured St. John will illustrate him if he comes back.—Ed.

"... SOME OLD ISSUES"

Sirs:

I was just struck with the notion to drag out some of my old issues and let you know what stories I enjoyed the most.

(1941) May—Land of the Shadow Dragons; June—Onslaught of the Druid Girls, Wanderer of Little Land, Sidney the Screwloose Robot; July—Goddess of Fire; August—The Return of Circe; September—The Liquid Man, The Man who Saw Through Time; October—The Earthquake Girl, The Truthful Liar; November—The Living Dead; December—The Reformation of Joseph Reed, The Beauty and the Beasts. (1942) January—The Daughter of Genghis Khan, Spook for Yourself; February—Doorway to Hell; March—War on Venus, Later Than You Think; April—Dwellers of the Deep; May—Daughter of the Snake God, The Holy City of Mars; June—The Quest in Time, Tink Takes a Fling; July—The Eagle Man; August—The Daughter of Thor, The Son of Death.

I always enjoy the Lefty Feep stories. Bloch is some writer. The best cover was St. John's on the July issue. The worst was Smith's on the June. The best story was "The Liquid Man."

Jerome C. Milam,
114 E. 52nd St.,
Savannah, Ga.

This list of yours is very interesting. We appreciate it when our readers go into such detail, because it helps us in the future to pick stories that will rank with the type most popular with you. So you really help yourself to better reading when you sit down and undo your hair like this.—Ed.

ANOTHER ISSUE—ANOTHER HIT

Sirs:

Another issue—another hit. That's my opinion of your book. Boy have I got an idea. Why not have Edgar Rice Burroughs write a Tarzan of the

(Continued on page 233)

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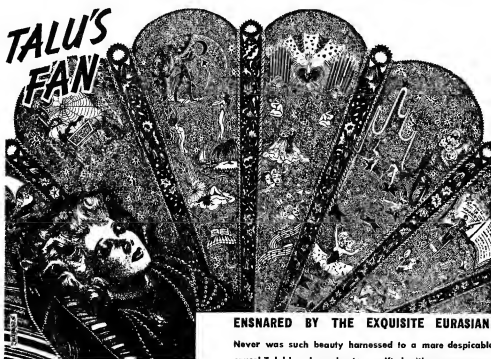
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fantastic
ADVENTURES

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(Continued from page 230)

Apes story for your hook. Here is my rating of the June issue:

1. The Quest in Time. 2. The Pied Piper Fights the Gestapo. 3. The Man Who Turned to Smoke. 4. The Giant From Jupiter. 5. Cupid Takes a Holiday. 6. Tink Takes a Fling. 7. The Sun Doom. 8. Cassius Siddle's Great Illusion. 9. The Incredible Mr. Kismet. 10. The Battle of Manetong. 11. Ehtide Jones on the Warpath. 12. The Skin-Deep Beauty. 13. Mr. Highbard's Magic Hat.

ALFRED HANSEN,
1312 Fries Ave.,
Wilmington, Calif.

Our companion magazine, *Amazing Stories*, will begin a new novel in the December issue, called "Warrior of the Dawn," which features a new character very much like Tarsan. Therefore we are unable to make any commitments on a Tarsan story. However, we have a hunch that when you read this new yarn, you are going to find that one of the most thrilling new writers to come along in a decade has camped right on your doorstep with exactly what you want! Incidentally, so you won't forget, his name is Howard Browne—and don't forget the "e"!—Ed.

JULY ISSUE

Sirs:

I have just finished the July *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES*. This is how I rate the issue:

1. The Eagle Man—this is undoubtedly the best story to appear in FA. 2. Safari to the Lost Ages. 3. The Weird Doom of Floyd Scritch. 4. Men Scared of Nothing. 5. The Return of the Hun. 6. Duncan's Dreadful Doll. 7. Headlines For Tod Shayne. 8. Hokum Hotel. 9. Vitality For Murder. 10. The Traitor. 11. The Mystery of Shaft 13.

Suggestions: A sequel to "The Eagle Man" in a few months. Find Burroughs and get a story.

RAYMOND O'CONNOR,
77 Stockton Street,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Mr. Burroughs generally notifies us by wire when he has a manuscript ready. So don't worry about him being lost. He knows where to find us! And we think he'll be doing more writing very shortly, now that his Hawaiian paradise has grown so military.—Ed.

WILCOX RIVALS BURROUGHS

Sirs:

Am now reading the July issue of FA, which has lived up to all your promises. Don Wilcox's novel, "The Eagle Man," rivals Burroughs' best—meaning it's plenty good!

McGivern came through with a fine story as usual. Would like to see some novels or novelets by Costello. Britain's "Return of the Hun" was good, but the other Nazi short, "The Traitor," by Harriss, seemed to go round and round and come out nowhere. Magarian is my favorite artist.



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When may we expect another Burroughs novel? Can't overlook McGivern's "Safari to the Lost Ages"—he's written a lot of my favorites!

MELVIN FISHER,
1210 50th Ave.,
Oakland, Calif.

Costello will do more for us along the lines you request. And we've already answered a question about Burroughs in this department.—Ed.

MAGARIAN VERSUS FINLAY

Sirs:

This is sort of a reply to Roland Bern's remarks about Magarian being better than Virgil Finlay.

I'll admit that Magarian is a pretty good artist, but when our boy Roland raves that Magarian is a better artist than Finlay, that's the last straw. While Magarian makes beautiful drawings and puts a lot of detail into them, they somehow never measure up to Finlay's illustrations. Every time I see a Finlay drawing of a human figure, I say to myself "the boys can have the Mac Girl, give me Finlay." The way he draws reminds me of the old masters. When he does a male or female body he creates a thing of beauty.

As for calling him a newcomer, Finlay may be new to FA, but many of his fans will recall his illustrations in magazines of seven or eight years back.

About FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, I have nothing to kick against. I think the magazine is one of the best of its kind. The editor is always striving to better the magazine by accepting the ideas of the readers and doing his best to comply with the majority. The stories in the August issue were great. Edmond Hamilton seems to grow better with age. His "Daughter of Thor" was great, as was the cover. You have a great array of authors. Don't lose them.

MARIO ZANONE,
466 Columbia Street,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Yes, Mario, Finlay is good. And we'll prove it with some of his work in the December issue, coming up. He's done one we call "The Dream Stealers," and it will thrill you. We have another which Finlay himself says is the best he's done in years. It will appear possibly in the January issue.—Ed.

A FORTUNATE MISTAKE!

Sir:

Before I was introduced to your wonderful publication, I had been a constant reader of detective yarns and used to buy magazines second hand, since most detective stories sound alike, and there was no sense in buying new ones.

Well, one day I sent someone to buy me one of these magazines, and instead I was brought a copy of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES with the story "The Liquid Man."

I was a little disappointed, but imagine my surprise after reading that and the ones following

(Continued on page 237)



HOMICIDE CALL

That stiff, cold body on the floor had been a healthy, beloved member of the Gorham household only a few hours ago. I studied the family circle, the ravishing sister, the clean-cut respected brother, the handsome artist, the sniveling ex-servant. "Every one of your stories is a bald-faced lie," I said. Too many clues! And then, as the mystery began to clear, death struck again! . . . There's tense, high-pitched excitement in George Armin Shaffel's **HOMICIDE CALL** which starts on page 21.

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- ★ **THROUGH THE WALL** by G. T. Fleming-Roberts—Thin walls of the rickety old boarding house let sounds through—sounds of murder so subtle and insidious that even the policemen was fooled. But not Mary Russell. So, naturally, she was slated as the next victim!
- ★ **ONE BORDER NIGHT** by Herold Channing Wire—"Things happen fast on the border; death crowds life so closely." Gold smuggled across the border was one thing, but to Clint Tyler, the biggest mistake the crooks made was to kidnap Mary Allen. A novelet starting on page 60.
- ★ **PRIVATE SLEUTHS AT YOUR COMMAND** by John York Cebot—Of Hergreve Secret Service Agency and the true story, unmatched by fiction, of how these keen detectives work for the good of the public. Quietly, unassuming, they play a major role in the public's protection.
- ★ **KEEP YOUR EYE ON IT** by Howard Browne—Meek little Wilbur Peddie didn't want to bother anyone. He just wanted to find the man who owed his company money. If the man had an annoying habit of murdering people, though, well, Wilbur would see him brought to justice.
- ★ **THROUGH MURDER'S EYES** by Dwight V. Swain—The bank robbery had taken place long ago, but pink-faced, mustachioed Colonel Rigsby managed to get in on the final killing! You'll gasp at the thrills this new type of western mystery brings. It starts on page 116.
- ★ **DEATH LAYS THE ODDS** by William F. McGivern—That carnival in the little Indiana town seemed a strange place for Jeff O'Neill to meet Nick Arcati of the many shady enterprises. "Unpleasant things have a way of happening," Arcati said. They did. See page 140.
- ★ **ENEMY AGENT** by Wyndham Mertyn—A letter from a dead man! Into battle with a desperate, canny blackmailer the letter hurled Anthony Trent, for he owed a debt of honor to the corpse. Sinister menace stalks the pages of this memorable book-length novel.

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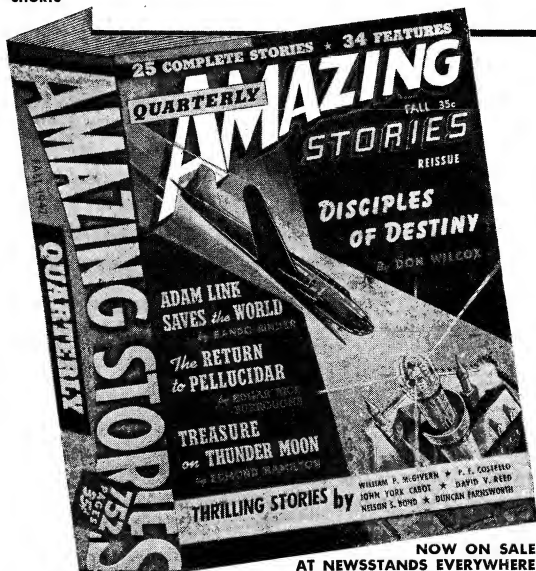
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(Continued from page 234)

it. I really thrilled at its exciting and entertaining accomplishments.

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Still, I received another and greater surprise when I was informed by my dealer that you also published *Amazing Stories*, and quarterlies too.

JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ,
(address unknown)

It sure was a lucky break for you! But about your request for the "correspondence corner"—we will be glad to insert it, if you'll write again and give us your address.—Ed.

PRESENTING A SPECIAL GIRL FRIEND!

Sirs:

I have never written to a magazine before, but I felt prompted to let you know you have at least one ardent reader who has no criticisms to offer. I have just finished your July issue, and rate your stories as follows:

1. The Eagle Man—an entirely new slant.
2. The Mystery of Shaft 13—it makes you think.
3. The Traitor—not exactly fantasy.
4. Men Scared of Nothing—a sound basis.
5. The Weird Doom of Floyd Scritch—Lefty Feep is one of my favorites.
6. Vitality For Murder—a good moral.

The rest rated about the same. I was disappointed in Safari to the Lost Ages. It left you up in the air just as you got going.

I think your covers oftener sell the magazine. For even if I didn't know about the grand stories within, I would buy just on the strength of your covers. As a matter of fact, that's how I got started reading *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* and *Amazing Stories*.

LIZA MAE SCHRAMM, (age 12),
521½ Broad Street,
Beloit, Wisconsin.

We're sure glad to have you write to us, Liza. You are now one of our special girl friends. When a little lassie of 12 enjoys our magazine as much as you do, we get the warm feeling that we're doing something pretty good after all. You just keep on reading us, Liza, and we'll keep on getting good stories for you. And drop us a line once in a while. It'll keep us on our toes.—Ed.

LEFTY FEEP

Sirs:

I just want to tell you to hang on to Lefty Feep. He is one grand character. Keep him coming every month!

A. MORRIS,
1330 S. Troy,
Chicago, Illinois.

(Concluded on page 239)

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PERSEUS— SLAYER OF THE MEDUSA

by HENRY GADE

He faced the most terrible monster of ancient legend, the snake-haired Medusa who could change men to stone

ACRISIUS, king of Athos, visiting an oracle, learned that his daughter, Danae, was destined to bear a son who would later slay him, decided to forestall the unhappy occurrence by confining her in a tower made of brass. Against ordinary human lovers, he assumed that this would be sufficient to protect her. But he didn't count on Zeus, the god of the lightning himself to descend to her in the tower on a shower of gold to become the father of Perseus.

Having failed in his precautions, Acrisius became irate and placed his daughter and her infant son in a wooden box and threw them into the sea. They were finally tossed ashore on the island of Seriphus. Here, Polydectes, king of the island, took them under his wing.

When Perseus grew up, he became a problem to Polydectes, who rather liked Danae, and thus the king decided to get rid of him. This had to be accomplished in a manner that would cast no cloud on his own head, and he struck on a novel way of achieving his end. He exacted a promise from Perseus, who was young and foolish, to bring him the head of the Medusa.

The Medusa (Gorgons) lived somewhere in the west with their sister, the Graeae. These sisters were old hags, who had only one eye and one tooth between them. Naturally, these possessions were quite precious to them.

Perseus, getting directions from Hermes and Athena, set out to find them, and when he had, proceeded to steal their single eye and tooth. With these as persuaders he forced the sisters to reveal the whereabouts of certain Nymphs.

These Nymphs gave him a pair of winged sandals, a wallet, resembling a gamekeeper's bag and the helmet of Hades. The helmet, through some power, could make its wearer invisible.

Hermes contributed a curved sword to Perseus' equipment and thus armed, he set out on his mission. Meanwhile Polydectes relaxed with a satisfied conviction that he would never again see the young Perseus, and that he could now work his will with Danae without interference.

Perseus proceeded to the lair of the Gorgons,

and while they slept, went into action. However, he was handicapped by the fact that if he looked upon the face of the Medusa he would be instantly turned to stone. It is a difficult thing to hack off the head of any creature without looking where you hack.

Athena solved this problem, by coming to his aid with the mirror-surface of her shield. The power of the Medusa, through some polarization of rays, was ineffective when they were reflected rays, and the mirror-image of the Medusa was harmless. Looking in the mirror, Perseus cut off the Medusa's head, stuffed it in his bag, and set out for Polydectes' island.

Medusa's sisters pursued him, but handicapped by their lack of eyes, he finally gave them the slip and escaped. Enroute, he landed in Ethiopia where he found a young girl named Andromeda in difficulty with a sea monster. He rescued her, and after a while, married her.

This delay kept him from Seriphus for a time, and Polydectes gathered courage to overpower the unwilling Danae. But Perseus and his bride arrived in time to effect a rescue. Perseus used the head of the Medusa to turn Polydectes and his entire court to stone.

Having no further use for the head, Perseus gave it to Athena and set out with Andromeda and Danae to visit his grandfather, Acrisius, once more.

Acrisius, fearing the oracle, had fled to Larissa in Thessaly. Perseus followed, and during some horseplay with a discus, struck Acrisius in the head and killed him, this bringing the prophecy of the oracle to its consummation.

Perseus, ashamed to return to Argos, gave his kingdom to Megapenthes (Acrisius' nephew) in exchange for the kingdom of Tiryns. There he lived out his royal life, founding Midea and Mycenae. He became the ancestor of such famed personages of legend as Eurystheus and Heracles.

So, although Perseus is sometimes regarded as a god, his godhood is only through his father, Zeus, and his whole lifetime was spent on Earth, and his association with the gods themselves was infrequent. There is little doubt that Perseus was a real person who actually lived.

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with either boys or girls interested in astronomy, travel, reading scientific fiction stories, etc. He is 17 years old. . . . William F. Coyle, 6933724, Co. M., 15 Inf., APO-3, Ft. Ord, Calif., would like to correspond with girls and boys between the ages of 18-22. He likes all sports, hunting and fishing preferred, likes to travel. . . . Alice Premiel, 270 Aris St., Cheektowago, New York, desires to correspond with soldiers, preferably between the ages of 18-24. . . . Sydney Rome, 39 Stiemens Street, Clifton, Johannesburg, South Africa, age 18½, Arts student at the University of the Witwatersrand, would like very much to correspond with any American science and fantasy-fiction fans on any subjects whatever, and promises faithfully to answer all letters. . . . Richard Post, 4227 Magoun Ave., East Chicago, Ind., has to swap many S.F. mags and books for AMAZING dated 1939 or back, or books by Burroughs or Claudy. Send for list now. . . . Fantasy Fiction Field, illustrated news weekly, will send a month's (4) free copies to any fan who sends in the required postage—4—1½ penny stamps. They would also like to announce that they have over 30,000 science-fiction magazines and books in stock, including all the copies of AMAZING way back to 1926. Their Chicon Convention booklet—25 pages of fotos on the Chicago Science Fiction Convention is now completed. Priced at 50c—only 50 copies to be printed. Get in touch with Julius Unger, Fantasy Fiction Field, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, N. Y. . . . Larry Price, Roberts, California, 19 years of age, weighs 200 pounds, blue eyes, brown hair, 6' 2", interested in music (all kinds), radio, camera, S.F., collecting and travel, would like to correspond with pen pal girls over 15 years of age. He will answer all letters promptly by airmail. . . . All fans living in the midwest and west, contact Harry Schmarje, 318 Stewart Rd., Muscatine, Iowa, for details on joining the midwest's fastest growing fan club, the Midwest Fan Society. . . . Norman Fuld, 32-02—86 Street, Jackson Heights, L. I., N. Y., has a chemical laboratory that he would like to dispose of. It consists of many chemicals—some of C.P. quality and much apparatus consisting of a balance, a condenser, several dozen test tubes and other porcelain, glass and metalware and many rubber stoppers. It is worth \$35.00. Will either sell or trade, and would prefer to trade it for a telescope. . . . Carroll Hamlin, 360 S. 14, Salem, Oregon, has complete sets of AMAZING STORIES and other science fiction mags that she will sell in complete groups at face value plus transportation charges to anyone anywhere. . . . Max Belz, Waldboro, Me., has back numbers of AMAZING and other scientific-fiction mags to dispose of and with few exceptions at original price. He also wants to engage in correspondence chess, but not with beginners. . . . Bill Caple, 412 North School Street, Lodi, Calif., 17 years of age, would like to correspond with either sex on research work on Black Magic. Age makes no difference. He would prefer contacts with Africa and South America, but will answer all letters immediately, no matter where they are from.



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SLAYER OF THE MEDUSA

He cut off the head of the Medusa (Goddess of Propaganda and Lies), and from her blood Pegasus, the winged horse, was born. (See page 238 for complete story)